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March 9, 1892.

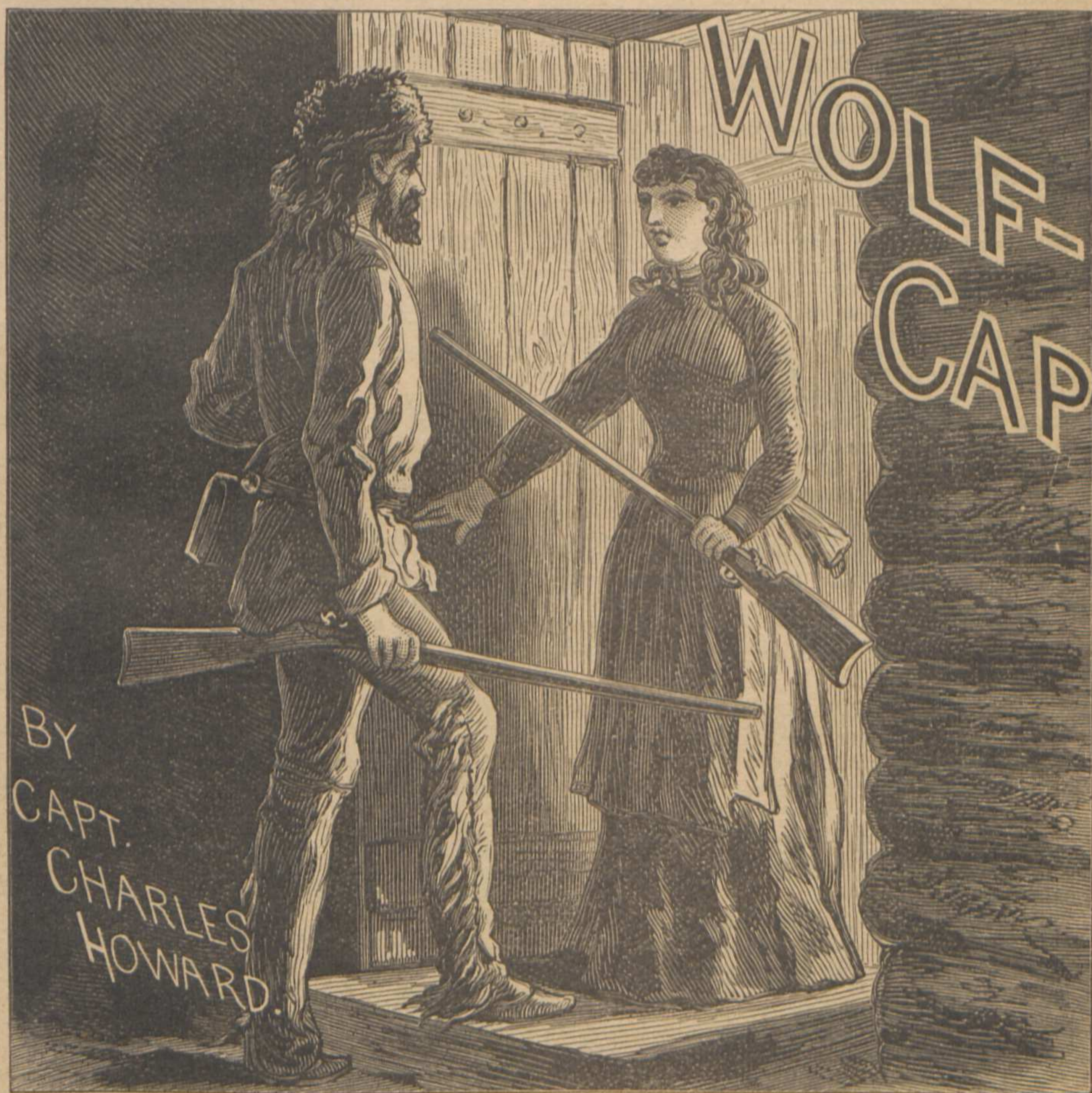
No. 426.

\$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST. NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

Vol. XXXIII.



"COME IN, NEIGHBOR BELT," SAID A VOICE AS THE DOOR FLEW OPEN, AND A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG GIRL, WHOSE HAND GRASPED A RIFLE, APPEARED TO THE HUNTER.

Wolf-Cap;

OR,

The Night-Hawks of the Fire-Lands.

A Tale of the Forest Fort.

BY CAPT. CHAS. HOWARD,
AUTHOR OF "THE WHITE TIGERS," "ELK
KING," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DOUBLY WARNED.

A SMALL apartment, walled with rough logs, and blackened by smoke.

A substantial fire burns in an uncouth but serviceable fireplace, and a man reclines on the puncheons in the ruddy blaze.

His sole companion is a huge yellow dog of the mastiff species; and his master's long black locks rest upon his shaggy coat.

It is nine o'clock at night, and the moon shines in an unclouded firmament.

Not a sound disturbs the stillness of the wood; but just at the edge of the meager clearing that lies before the cabin, a little river flows northward with a low noise, for it is almost bank full.

Man and dog are wide awake; the former gazes into the fire, the latter looks up into the hard, sunbrowned face.

The master is a great, strong man, whose looks, physique and voice, when he speaks, indicate a long frontier life. He is perhaps three-and-forty years of age. Some would say that he is fifty; but people must not judge age by certain crowsfeet on the brow; trouble makes young men old. His occupation is revealed by a quantity of animal traps lying in one corner of the room, and suspended from a rafter overhead hangs a bundle of skins, ready for the market at Fort Sandusky.

But he rises and looks at the dog, who bristles up and runs to the door, protected by a strong oaken plank.

"What is it, Yellow Dick?" asks the trapper, standing beside his companion, rifle in hand, and peering into the moonlight through a crevice between two logs. "I would hev sworn that I heard the voice of a man; but—"

He paused abruptly, for Yellow Dick had suddenly pricked his long ears anew, and the trapper began to unbarricade the door.

"'Tis old Johnny, Dick, as sure as death," he said, glancing at the mastiff while he worked at his plank. "He hasn't been this way for a three-month. Mebbe he brings news from the seat of war."

The dog seemed to understand the man, for his fierceness abated, and he stepped from the portal.

"There! I knew it was Johnny Appleseed," the trapper said triumphantly, as he opened the cabin door, and let a flood of moonlight into the dingy room. "Here he comes, down the river. What's that he's saying, Dick?"

The speaker leaned forward and caught these words uttered in a melodious voice:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he

hath anointed me to blow the trumpet in the wilderness and sound the alarm in the forest; for behold the tribes of the heathen are round about your door, and a devouring flame followeth after them."

The herald of danger stood near the edge of the water, and looked like some wild being from spirit-land.

"Old Johnny means somethin'; somethin's gone wrong somewhar," cried the trapper, becoming excited, and then in a louder tone he spoke the singular cognomen of the man of the wilderness—"Johnny Appleseed!"

The latter turned and after some hesitation came forward.

"Do not detain the Lord's anointed long," said the little wiry man, exhibiting his old restless activity, "for the Philistines are this night sweeping down upon the scattered tents of Israel, who will be found without the cities of refuge."

"But, Johnny, what has happened?" queried the settler, who could not repress a smile at the herald's quaint phraseology.

"The Philistines hold revel in the great walled city on the northern water."

"What! has Hull surrendered?"

"Even so, Israel is again in captivity, and the families on her borders must feel the fire now."

The trapper was silent for a while.

"Then the red-coated and red-skinned devils are coming to devastate the frontiers," he said, in a tone scarcely audible.

"Their forces no man can number," said the strange herald. "They are like the sands of the sea-shore. But I must go. I am appointed to deliver my message before every door in the forest, that the Lord's chosen may flee from the wrath to come."

"Then go, Johnny. I should not have detained you a minute. Yours is an errand of mercy. I have a duty to perform this night. Go, Johnny; tell them all the swoop of the red eagles; and tell them that Wolf Cap says, 'Fly to the block-houses without delay!'"

The pioneer hero started forward, but paused after taking a step, and drew the portion of an old volume from his bosom.

"Here's news right fresh from heaven," he said, and he tore a leaf from the book and handed it to the trapper.

It was a leaf from Swedenborg's writings, for Johnny Appleseed—Jonathan Chapman—is no myth, and he was a true disciple of the Swedish seer.

Having accomplished his duty, the strange man, clad in nothing save a garment fashioned from a coffee sack, and bearing a long distaff, started off to spread dismay throughout the fire-lands.

"So Hull has surrendered," muttered Wolf-Cap through clinched lips, as he turned into the cabin again. "I know it was a cowardly affair for Detroit was proof against ten thousand foes; but Hull was the wrong man in the right place. I know it; I told the soldiers so when I war there not long ago. These frontiers hev got to be desolated now, through the cowardice of one man," the lone trapper continued, busying himself with preparations for a night journey.

"Our block-houses are poor excuses for bulwarks; but we must get the women and children in them as quickly as possible."

He donned his hunting accouterments and the wolf-skin cap which had given him the *sobriquet* that entitles our romance, and replenished the fire.

"I'll leave you to keep house, Dick," he said, addressing the dog. "I'll be back about day-break. Now old fellow do your duty, and don't let a sneakin' red-skin over this portal."

He patted the dog's shaggy back, barricaded the door, and made his exit from the cabin, by the roof.

"I'm pretty sure that Johnny missed 'em," he said, pausing for a moment beside the cabin and communing with himself. "He came down the river, and they are too far to his left. Yes, I guess he missed 'em."

The last word still quivered his lips when he started in a northeasterly direction, leaving the river to his left.

A well-defined trail stretched before him, and he walked rapidly through the moonlit forest, trailing his long-barreled rifle at his side.

It was a night in August, 1812, and, as not a breath of wind was stirring, the heat was oppressive.

Suddenly he paused and listened to a silver voice, soaring skyward far away.

"That's Huldah's voice," he said, audibly. "No woman can sing like her in these parts. I don't know, but somehow or other I think an uncommon sight of that girl. She looks so much like Bessie did twenty years ago," and here the rough deer-skin sleeve dashed a tear from the speaker's eye.

"But I wonder what makes her so happy just now—when terror sits in many a white girl's heart? Ah! old Johnny did not warn *them*!"

He leaped the little rivulet by which he stood while speaking, and threaded the forest mazes again. Presently he came upon a neat clearing, in the center of which, surrounded by a rail-fence, stood a cabin, somewhat larger than his bachelor abode. An air of industry pervaded the spot, and the honeysuckles that half concealed the little square windows, proclaimed the presence of the softer—the flower-loving sex.

The song that had startled the trapper by the little creek, was mute now, and a dead silence brooded the settler's home, on which the moonlight softly fell.

Wolf-Cap leaned against a tree at the edge of the clearing, and thought of the coming whirlwind of destruction.

"Here's the toil of months," he cried. "Levi has labored like a giant to build a shelter for Huldah's head, and now to think that the flames must, in one brief hour, destroy it all. Oh, I wish I could wield the thunderbolts of Heaven for a single minute!"

He approached the cabin boldly, his giant form bathed in moonshine, and a low growl saluted his ears as he stepped upon the little porch before the door.

"Who's there?" said a woman's voice, beyond the heavy door.

"Me—Wolf-Cap," answered the trapper, and he heard nimble fingers undoing the fastenings.

"Come in, neighbor Belt," said a voice as the

door flew open, and a beautiful young girl, whose right hand gripped a rifle, appeared to the hunter.

He obeyed, and as he crossed the threshold the door was closed again and barred.

"Ye warn't lookin' for me to-night, I guess," he said, taking in the room at a glance.

"No, neighbor Belt; but you are none the less welcome. Father has just retired—"

"I'll be thar in a minute, Belt," interrupted a man's voice in the next room. "I thought it war you when I heard your step on the porch. What's up? Ye kin talk while I dress."

"A good deal what's bad is up," said Wolf-Cap, in a loud tone. "Hull has surrendered, and a swarm of British and Indians are pouring down upon the frontier."

"Who told you, Belt?"

The speaker had appeared like a flash, and, scarcely more than half-dressed, stood before the trapper.

"Who told me?—Johnny Appleseed. He went down the Huron to-night, warning every settler. I thought he'd missed you, an' so I came here myself. The storm is breaking at last, Armstrong. We've enjoyed comparative quiet thus far during the war; but the cowardice—I know it was just that and nothin' else—of Hull, has unloosed the dogs of hell, an' they'll be here pretty soon. To the block-house is the cry now. If safety lies anywhere, it is there."

Levi Armstrong, the old settler, stood in the dim light of the tin fat lamp, and quivered with rage.

"Belt," he said, slowly and with emphasis, "I'm not goin' to give up the work of my hands without a struggle. You kin bet on that."

"But Huldah must go to the block-house. Strong's is the strongest, and best defended. We must act—"

"So long as father remains from the block-house I remain, too," interrupted Huldah Armstrong, as she touched Wolf-Cap's arm. "I share his love for our home. He shall not be separated from me."

"Huldah, you must go to Strong's to-morrow," said Levi. "I will go with you."

"Truly, father?"

"Truly, girl."

"Then I am content to go," she said. "When do you look for the marauders, neighbor Belt?"

"They are liable to come at any hour," was the reply. "But in truth I do not look for them for several days yet. No doubt Johnny heard of the disaster from some Indian, and is many hours in advance of the slayers."

"And what are you going to do, Belt?" asked Levi Armstrong.

"I had settled upon no plan of action. I've got a cabin, and I hate to leave it to the torch. The Night-Hawks are with Proctor, you know. I wonder if they will come down upon the frontiers?"

"To be sure they will, neighbor Belt."

"God help the frontiers, then."

"Yes, yes."

"But I must go back," said the trapper; nobody is at home but Yellow Dick. I guess we'll not go to the block-house till to-morrow night. I think we're safe in keeping aloof till then; 'tis

best, you know, to seem in ignorance of the threatening danger."

"I think so too, Belt. You'll come over to-morrow evening, ready for the run?"

"I'll be here, and then," with a glance at Levi that told much, "we'll shelter our heads beneath Strong's roof."

Several minutes later Wolf-Cap was returning to his cabin, and at length the grayish dawn of day revealed it to him.

"Nobody has disturbed Dick," he said, after inspecting the little structure's surroundings. "He's a good housekeeper—no woman in the land kin beat him, but—What's that? By Huron! somebody has nailed a piece of paper to my door."

With his eyes fastened upon the object, he quickened his steps, and presently paused on the flagstone stoop.

Before his eyes was a piece of dingy paper, bordered with blood, and held in its place by a knife, the point of which was buried deeply in the firm wood!

The uncouth letters had been traced on the dirty sheet with a stick dipped in gore, and were arranged in the following order:

"WE HUNT YOU. YOU KNOW US. FLY OR DIE!
"THE NIGHT-HAWKS."

The trapper looked at the warning a long time, and gradually a smile of contempt wreathed his lips.

"So, Royal Funk, you and your devils are in these parts again," he said, "and I tell you, once for all, that I am not an illegal squatter. You can't scare Card Belt."

Then, without more words, he ascended to the roof and joined Yellow Dick, who received him with manifestations of delight in the room below. Fearlessly he threw wide the cabin door, and spread a map of the Northwest, face downward, on the floor.

Then, with a piece of charcoal, he traced these words on the parchment:

"Roy Funk, I'm going to remain on the fire-lands. You can't frighten me. I spare not, and no mercy ask. No block-house shall shelter me!"

Twice the trapper read the defiance to his dog, as though the animal was possessed of comprehension, and then he pinned it to the door with the point of a knife.

CHAPTER II.

SILVER HAND, THE WYANDOT.

THE reader has heard Wolf-Cap aver that he was not an illegal squatter on the fire-lands, and while he prepares to sustain the defiance nailed to his cabin door, let us inquire into the meaning of his declaration.

The "fire-lands" were not, as the casual reader would suppose, a tract of country blackened and rendered barren almost by the flames. On the contrary, their broad acres, well watered by majestic rivers, teemed with plenty, and even their *indolent* farmer to-day finds no starvelings about his premises.

Erie, Huron, and a small part of Ottawa counties, comprise that portion of the Western Ohio Reserve known as the fire-lands. The tract embraces five hundred thousand acres, and

the term "fire-lands" originated from the circumstance of the State of Connecticut having granted these lands, in 1792, as a donation to certain sufferers by fire occasioned by the English during the Revolutionary War, particularly at New London, Fairfield and Norwalk. Connecticut, at that time, holding jurisdiction over much land in Ohio, made other grants, of a nature similar to the above, and to this day the Western Reserve is often called by its old title, New Connecticut.

Though Wolf-Cap, or Card Belt, was not a sufferer at English hands, he had a right to the ground on which his little cabin stood. That right was a grant from the proprietors of the fire-lands; but he had had the misfortune to lose the document while *en route* to his claim. He had trapped along the streams of his native State, Connecticut, until they refused to yield the wished-for supply of fur-bearing animals, and, longing for a new pelt *El Dorado*, he fell in with the inducements offered by the settlements of New Connecticut.

He established his claim to a certain spot of ground, notwithstanding the loss of the title, and erected his cabin, in 1811. A treaty had previously been made with the Wyandots, who inhabited a portion of the ground, and until the breaking out of the war of 1812, the red denizens of the fire-lands had kept the promises of the treaty unbroken.

But in the settlement of the fire-lands, as in the settlement of all new countries, a class of rough characters appeared on the surface. These were, in the greater part, Canadian trappers, who were dwelling on the grant prior to its change of owners, and they refused to accede to the demands of the legal squatters. They had no right to the land, for they had been English soldiers, and disturbers of the peace between whites and Indians.

They drove honest squatters from their homes, and carried on a reign of terror throughout the fire-lands, until the Connecticut company overawed them with settlers. Still they carried on their lawlessness. At midnight they would break into some squatter's cabin and demand a sight of his deed; and if the poor man could not produce it, as was often the case, considering the poor facilities extant those days for preserving paper documents, he would be hustled from his door, and the torch applied to the logs.

Wolf-Cap's domicile was invaded one night, two months prior to the opening of hostilities; but he gave the Night-Hawks—as the outlaws were called—such a warm reception, that they were glad to depart without accomplishing their purpose. In the affray one of the scoundrels was fatally shot by the trapper, and their numbers thus reduced to nine.

The leader of the band was a rather handsome, brigandish sort of man, boasting of the name of Royal Funk. He had served under Arnold in his descent upon Connecticut, and followed other Tories to the West after the patriotic struggle. He had a commanding eye, and a nature fitted to lord it over a lot of low characters like those whom he drew around him in New Connecticut, and christened the Night-Hawks.

Their villainies were brought to a close by the declaration of war. One day they left the fire-

lands, and joined the British army of the Northwest, and the settlers breathed freer.

British gold drew hundreds of savages to the flag of St. George; but a portion of the Wyandots adhered heroically to the American cause. The fire-land settlers centered all their hopes on Hull. If he would repulse the allies before Detroit, their homes were safe. If the General failed, then the Night-Hawks and their red helpers would return to devastate homes illy defended.

Therefore, the reader can imagine the terror spread throughout the grant by the wild message of Johnny Appleseed.

"We are going to help Proctor. When we return, look out, usurper."

Such words Wolf-Cap found chalked on his cabin door, on his return from Sandusky, one day in the spring lately passed. He saw that he had saved his life by being absent, and he awaited with impatience and anxiety the result of British operations in the Northwest. Noble-minded and courageous, almost to a fault, he did not fear the threats of the Night-Hawks, as the reader has seen by his defiance; but the unprotected settlers called forth his sympathy.

"I'll help take Huldah to Strong's," he said, looking at his dog, after posting his defiance, "and then I'll make this cabin our castle, Dick. I don't know as I've got much to live for, since Bessie left me, and I'll try to rid the people of several of their plagues afore I go. Here be six rifles an' plenty o' ammunition, and we'll drop a doe to-night, if it gets cloudy."

The trapper hailed the approach of night with joy, and locking Yellow Dick within the cabin, took up the trail to Levi Armstrong's hut. As he hurried along, he planned for the future, which cast gloomy clouds over him—hunted man as he was.

"Just let anybody touch one o' Huldah Armstrong's black hairs," he suddenly exclaimed, aloud. "Just let 'em do it. I say, and, be he white or red, I'll let a ray of sunshine through his heart. That girl is just the purest, fairest creature in New Connecticut, and I'm her champion, I am—Card Belt, I love that girl," and in the gloaming a crimson flush appeared on his cheek; "but not like a young man. No! I'm old enough to be her father, and I love her because she looks like Bessie. I often wonder if she will ever have a young lover. Ah! if she gets down to Strong's, the young bucks will go up over her face, and they won't be able to drop an Indian for looking into her eyes."

He communed thus with himself until he reached the creek near Armstrong's clearing, when the whiz of a bullet broke his train of thoughts, and brought him to a sudden halt.

"That's close," he ejaculated, glancing at the work made by the ball in the tree near his head. "But a miss is as good as a mile, and I'll show the Greaser that two men can play with rifles at the same time."

The next moment he sunk into the tall grass that lined the margin of the stream, resolved to outwit his foe.

"I begin to see through the mist," he said, with a broad smile, a moment after disappearing among the grass. "Silver Hand is up to one of his old tricks again. Curse that In-

dian! I've got to break him of such practices. He shoots too uncommon close, sometimes."

Then a bird-call issued from the trapper's throat, and was answered from a spot a short distance away, on the opposite bank of the stream.

"I knew it was that red-skin," and with the last word the trapper's cap appeared above the grass. "Homsomever it is best to be cautious—there!"

A slight noise told that the cap had been struck by some object, and the hunter lowered it to find it perforated by an arrow of singular workmanship.

Then, placing the cap on his head without withdrawing the shaft, he rose to his feet simultaneously with the appearance of a tufted Indian beyond the murky water.

A minute later and the twain had met.

"Silver Hand, you haven't visited a fellow much o' late," said Wolf-Cap, looking into the black eyes of the prepossessing young Wyandot. "I wasn't looking for you hereabouts, but you're the very chap I wanted to see."

"Silver Hand glad to see Wolf-Cap, too," said the Indian. "He much to tell white brother 'bout the big white coward in the North."

"I don't want to talk about Hull, chief," said the trapper. "I swear away in my heart when I think of his cowardice. But we have work to do. The frontiers swarm with fiends now, and I go to guide a family to Strong's fort. Of course you're going with me, Silver Hand; we'll talk as we walk."

The trapper started forward with a look at the Indian; but the red arm darted forward and touched his arm.

"Wolf-Cap need go no further—house empty," said Silver Hand.

"Whose house?" and a deathly pallor overspread the settler's face, and told how he dreaded to hear the Wyandot's answer.

"The house of the tall old pale-face and pretty girl."

"Empty, Silver Hand? You must be mistaken. They were to wait for me."

"But they gone, sure," persisted the chief. "Silver Hand stop at cabin to tell them about the big coward; but he find nobody in house. The dog, too, was gone; but Silver Hand find paper on the door—paper with pale-face words on it."

The chief produced a piece of paper from his bosom as he spoke, and handed it to the trapper.

It was night now, but the light of the rising moon enabled Wolf-Cap to decipher the rude writing on the sheet.

"We have gone to Strong's with the Logans. We left at sundown, and you will find us in the old fort."

Thus read the message on the door, and the trapper bit his lip when he looked up at the young warrior.

"Mebbe we'll find 'em there and mebbe we won't," he said, angrily. "I guess the Logans were frightened nigh to death, and would give old Levi no rest, until he promised to guide them to Strong's. I thought he had a head of his own, and he promised to wait for me, too."

Wolf-Cap was silent for several moments, and

the Indian regarded him with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"When pale-faces leave lodge?" he questioned at length.

"At sundown. They're not half-way to Strong's now. We'll let 'em go, though, Silver Hand; but we could intercept them if we wanted to. Old Levi needs a lesson for his action."

"But his girl too putty to be in the woods at night. Bad Wyandots and Night-Hawks come down together from the North, and—"

"There! that's enough, chief," interrupted the trapper. "I could let old Levi go; but Huldah, never! Come! we kin catch 'em at the mouth of Eel Creek, for they've taken the black-deer trail to Strong's. It'll take fast travelin', Silver Hand; but we kin do it. You an' me kin do anything."

Silver Hand sprung to the task with great eagerness, and wheeling to the left, the twain hurried down the right bank of the creek. A rapid march of several hours brought them to the objective point; and Silver Hand at once dropped upon all-fours to examine the trail.

"Party gone by!" he said at last, looking up at the trapper. "Old settler, young man and four squaws. They walkin' fast, too—almost run."

"The—deuce!" exclaimed Wolf-Cap, much chagrined at the result of their journey. "But," with a faint smile of satisfaction, "I'm glad they passed this point safely. It argues well for their arrival at Strong's. How long since did they pass, Silver Hand?"

The Wyandot examined the trail again.

"Only little while ago; grass stil bent down."

"Then we stand some chances of catching them this side o' Strong's."

"Yes, by fast walkin'."

"I'll see 'em inside the fort afore I go back to my hut," said Wolf-Cap with determination. "Royal Funk and me for it, then, for I tell you, Silver—"

The distant report of a rifle broke his sentence and caused him to shoot an anxious look into the Wyandot's eyes.

Three more faint reports followed the first, and Wolf-Cap was about to spring forward, when Silver Hand thrust him backward toward the rushes that grew about the mouth of the creek.

"Chief—"

"Sh!"

The swift tread of feet was heard, and nine dark forms darted past the couple's concealment and disappeared in the darkness that hid from them the flash of the distant rifles.

Without a word, and at the same moment, the trail-hunters leaped to their feet.

For a moment they listened to the dying footsteps, and Silver Hand was the first to speak.

"Wolf-Cap count 'em?" he asked.

"Yes. American bullets have spared every Night-Hawk," grated the trapper. "We must call 'em back," and drawing a pistol from his belt he discharged it in the air.

The next second the admirable counterfeit of a death-yell pealed from the Wyandot's throat, and the twain shrunk back into the rushes again to await the result of their stratagem.

"They're comin' back, chief," said the trapper

in a low tone. "Now, come with me. We'll git between 'em an' our friends if we can."

Certain sounds told them that at least a goodly portion of the outlaws were returning, and silently they entered the water and waded away.

The sounds of battle toward Strong's had died in the gloom, and an impenetrable veil of fearful mystery hung over the fate of the fugitives.

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE AT STRONG'S.

STRONG'S block-house, so frequently alluded to heretofore, had been erected as a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the "fire-lands." It was a large structure, capable of affording shelter for fifty families, and built with a view to strength and endurance. The logs were secured in the old dovetail fashion and the roof doubly clapboarded. The second story projected five feet over the first, thus enabling the defenders to fire upon any foe that might attempt to force the lower doors. The Huron River lay fifty yards from the front palisade of the block-house which stood at the foot of a hill, cleared by the settlers' axes.

The bottom of the hill was selected for the building site, owing to the proximity of water, and a well also yielded the life-giving fluid within the fort. The strong palisade that surrounded the "house of refuge" was a double security, and the settlers felt proud of their work when completed. A stalwart settler named Zebulon Strong had superintended the erection of the stronghold, hence its rather imposing cognomen.

"I guess the families are all in now," said Zebulon Strong, to a young man who was standing by a loophole in the second story of the backwoods fort.

"All in, captain? Bless you, no! The Logans are out yet."

"And old Levi Armstrong, too," said another settler, who, standing near, had caught the brief conversation.

"Yes, there is Levi—I had overlooked him," the youth remarked quickly.

"He and the Logans do not rightly belong here," said Strong. "Levi lent Throop a hand at his fort down on Massanga Creek, and there he belongs. He will take the Logans with him."

"But should he ask admittance here, you will not refuse, captain?"

"Our quota of families is full now. We can't accommodate another," answered Strong, with the air of a man elevated by a small command. "And besides, I am confident that we are surrounded now. The girls maintain that they caught a glimpse of Indians at the river, and I myself have seen feathers on the top of the hill. They wait for the opening of the gates; but nothing under heaven can induce me to please them in that particular. We've a good supply of water; and I tell you, sir, that the gates don't open again until the danger is passed."

The foregoing conversation occurred on the night of Levi Armstrong's abandonment of his cabin, and Zebulon Strong's mien told that he was determined to adhere to his determination at all hazards.

Johnny Appleseed had performed a noble duty. Those whom he had warned allowed no grass to grow under their feet. While he yet lingered in sight of the uncouth cabin, it was deserted, and its inmates were flying toward Strong's fort. All those who claimed shelter beneath its roof had caused their names to be registered in the commandant's book, so, when the last registered family had passed the palisades, the gates were closed and barred.

The appearance of the Indians quickly followed the strange man's warning. They had executed forced marches from Detroit, hoping to reach the "fire-lands" in advance of tidings of the surrender; but found themselves outwitted. This disappointment only strengthened their desire for blood, and on the evening that followed the gathering at the fort, they made their presence known.

After declaring that the gates should open no more until the danger had passed, Captain Zebulon Strong left the two men, the younger of whom turned to the loophole looking upon the level plain, that stretched from the block-house to the river. The moon was shining brightly, and from his elevated position he caught the shimmer of the Huron's waves.

"I have seen no Indian feathers," he murmured, sweeping the bank with his eye. "The captain is getting too arbitrary of late. It's all well enough to be cautious; but this thing of barring the gates against our fellow-men won't do."

The last word was spoken in an underbreath, for the crack of rifles smote his ears, and instantly the block-house was a scene of confusion.

The reports sounded terribly distinct on the night air, and seemed to emanate from a spot about three hundred yards down the river.

"Keep your senses, women!" was heard the stern, hoarse voice of Zebulon Strong, and the look which he threw upon the timid ones forced them into quietude. "We are not attacked yet. When the devils have forced the palisades and swarm up-stairs, then there will be time for shrieks. What do you see, Harmon?"

The interrogative was addressed to the youth with whom he had conversed a short time before, and the motion of the young man's hand caused the commandant to step forward.

"Look through this loop, captain," said Mark Harmon, stepping aside. "Look down the river. The Indians have fired upon some fugitives, and they run for their lives."

Zebulon Strong put his eyes to the loop-hole, and saw four dark figures running toward the fort. The foremost was a man, who carried a dark, human-shaped object over his left shoulder; the others, seemingly, were women.

"Open the gates and let 'em in!" cried a voice, and presently the same words were heard on all sides.

"I command this block-house!" and with a livid face and flashing eyeballs, Zebulon Strong sprung from the loop and wheeled upon his people. "The gates don't open till I give the order. The Indians are ready for a rush so soon as the gates grind ajar. Every stump on the plain shelters a red-skin. No, the gates don't open!"

"But the fugitives are the Logans and the Armstrongs," remonstrated Mark Harmon, biting his lip with indignation.

"They belong at Throop's," hoarsely hissed the captain. "We'll be massacred if we open the gates to them."

"Better die for an act of mercy than outraging the dictates of humanity."

A contemptuous sneer came to the captain's lips, and as he turned to the porthole again he drew a pistol.

"I'll kill the next man who talks of opening the gates this night," he said, fiercely. "The fugitives might have been safe at Throop's; let them pay for their decision at our palisades, if it comes to this."

"They will reach the gates before their pursuer!" cried a watcher at the port-hole, joyously; but the words fell on blank ears, for the gates, alas! through the inhumanity of one man, would not be open to them.

"Levi is carrying his daughter," said a second settler; "John Logan is not with them; he must have been shot down the river."

The sight of the brave fugitives almost at his gates, and hard-pressed by the savage foe, did not soften Captain Strong's heart, in which cowardice and personal fear burrowed like a ground-hog.

The pale faces of the fugitives were visible in the moonlight, and all at once a cry came from the very shadow of the palisades:

"Open the gates!"

Zebulon strong turned from the port-hole and halloed to the guards below:

"Watch the gates closely. Kill the first man who attempts to open them!"

"All right, captain!" responded a voice from the darkness below, and the commandant was rising erect when Mark Harmon leaped upon him.

The young frontiersman was almost as strong as the captain, and he bore him to the puncheons before he could resist.

"I'm sorry it comes to this, captain," he said, beckoning several men to his assistance. "We're not going to let women die at our doors when we can save them. Now lie still until we release you, or by heavens we'll turn you without the fort!"

Other hands than the young borderman's now seized the captain, who soon relinquished his struggles, and Harmon sprung to his feet.

"Quick, Mark!" cried a man at a port-hole. "Quick! they're thnndering at the gates."

The next instant the youth had disappeared, and six stalwart bordermen vanished with him like a flash.

"Helpless friends are at the gate!" he cried, as, pistol in hand, he sprung toward the sentries. "We command this fort now. Stand back!"

The sentries, instead of retreating, flew to the work of unbarring the clumsy gate, and in a moment the work was accomplished.

"Have you no mercy, Captain Strong?" cried Levi Armstrong's voice, while the eight men worked at the fastenings.

"Yes, yes—in a minute we'll save you, shout ed young Harmon, and when the gate flew open he was the first to leap forward.

As he did so, full twenty dark forms rose from behind as many stumps, and the next second, a volley poured in at the gate.

Two of the rescuers staggered back, and Mark Harmon, uninjured, but with a wounded girl in his arms, turned to the gate again.

"Quick! they are charging you!" shouted a dozen agonized voices from the upper portion of the block-house; but such words were unnecessary, for the men at the gate comprehended their danger.

The clearing seemed literally covered with savages, and between the foremost and the bordermen a terrible fight was progressing at the palisades. A volley was poured into the red ranks from the port-holes, and a number fell; but the greater portion of the settlers had rushed below, and were trying to beat the red-skins from the gate that it might be closed.

At last, after half an hour of the most desperate fighting on record, the ponderous gate was swung to again and barred; and with blows indicative of future vengeance, on the heavy oaken boards, the Indians retreated to cover.

Twelve of their number had fallen in the attack, while no less than ten of the bordermen, or one fourth of the fort's defenders, lay dead between the palisades and the strong logs.

But the mission of humanity had resulted in success!

Levi Armstrong, his daughter Huldah, and the Logan girls were safe for a while at least, behind strong timbers; but the yells of their foes told the settlers that the Wyandot looked upon his defeat in the light of success.

He had reduced the number of the fort's defenders, when not a single man could be spared, while the loss of his twelve braves would not be felt by the hundreds that still remained.

"Captain Strong," said Mark Harmon after the fight, "we are willing to restore you to your command, for we honor your experience in Indian warfare. Humanity compelled us to treat you as we have. Now we are willing that the gates shall remain closed."

"I should say you were," said Zebulon Strong, with an ill-concealed sneer, as he glanced at the dead bordermen who had been borne into the fort, prior to burial. "I will take command again. I'm to be obeyed in every thing after this. We are besieged now, and like men we will die, if die we must together."

His speech was greeted with applause, and many despairing ones took new hope; but Levi Armstrong whispered to Mark Harmon:

"The captain must be watched. He hasn't begun to forgive you fellers for savin' our lives."

After Zebulon Strong resumed command of the fort, its defensive resources were thoroughly inspected, and the dead buried.

"There's one man whom we should have with us," remarked a young settler in the presence of Captain Strong, shortly after the burial.

"Who is he?" asked a dozen voices.

"Wolf-Cap. I tell you he's worth a dozen rifles."

"Ay, a hundred," said Mark Harmon. "If he and Silver Hand were in the fort!"

"We can get along without 'em," grated

Strong, shooting a fierce look at the young frontiersman. "We'll fight our own battle without the aid of illegal squatters and Indians!"

His last sentence was uttered in a subdued tone, as he turned from the group, and other men than the old settler and Mark Harmon thought that the captain would bear watching.

CHAPTER IV

CAUGHT.

WOLF-CAP entertained several good reasons for suggesting Strong's Fort as a place of refuge for the Armstrong family. Throop's block-house was nearer the settler's cabin than Strong's, but the latter was better adapted for defense.

Left to his own choice, Levi Armstrong would have sought shelter at Throop's, which post his hands had helped to rear, and consequently he could well claim protection there. The Logans, too, belonged to Throop's; but fearful lest the little block-house, illy-defended, would soon succumb to the red tomahawk, they resolved to seek Strong's. As the sequel will show, they would have fared better at the first-named fort.

The band of six fugitives, after leaving the Armstrong cabin, traveled fast. Levi counseled a delay till the arrival of Wolf-Cap, but John Logan and his sisters would listen to no such counsel, and the settler therefore broke his promise to the trapper.

The mouth of Eel Creek was reached, and the Huron crossed in safety, and the fears of the fugitives began to subside.

But suddenly, while pushing down the left bank of the Huron, the report of a rifle saluted their ears, and John Logan fell to rise no more. Instantly the settler turned to combat his foes, when three more shots were poured into their little ranks by the hidden enemies, and then the fugitives, knowing themselves near Strong's and ahead of the slayers, turned and fled.

Fortunately, the little party escaped injury by the second volley; but Levi lifted his daughter from the ground and bore her, shielded by his body, to the frontier fort.

The Indians kept near the fugitives, but did not attempt to make a capture. They seemed bent on the success of some stratagem, which was seen by the whites at the eleventh hour. The fort was already invested by a powerful force of savages fresh from the victory at Detroit, and certain signals told the settlers' pursuers of well-laid plans. But the bravery of the fort's defenders had defeated the stratagem, as the reader has seen, but not without the loss of valuable men.

"Stop, chief! In the name of Heaven, listen to that!"

The speaker was Card Belt, and it was the volley fired by the stump-sheltered savages at the opening of Strong's gates that called forth his words.

"Indians attack fort," said the Wyandot, in his native tongue. "White people get to gates, and when they open, Indians shoot."

"But a real battle is raging. Hark! I hear the yells of the Indians. Come! we'll go and help the boys."

But the chief slowly shook his head.

"No use go there," he said; "we can't help pale-faces;" and standing in the shadows of several giant trees, the couple listened to the sound of battle.

The trapper, while he listened, acknowledged the strength of Silver Hand's counsel. He believed that Fort Strong was invested, and knew that for the present they could render no assistance to its inmates.

At last the couple heard the yells of the beaten savages, and exchanged looks of satisfaction.

"I'd like to know whether Levi and his girl got into Strong's or not," said Wolf-Cap, with an anxious expression of countenance. "Silver Hand, they'd better not touch one o' Huldah Armstrong's hairs. I say I'll kill the first fellar what does—there! I should judge that it's pretty near midnight now," he continued, after a pause, during which the Indian made no attempt to speak. "We'd better be movin' somewhere. The fellars what we fooled down on Eel Creek haven't passed yet; but mebbe they've joined their red brethren by another route. They could do that, you know. The troubles of Strong's fort has begun now, and we've got to help 'em, somehow or other. But first, let's go down to my hut and stir up a few eatables. Besides, I want to see if everything's right thar, and to liberate Yellow Dick."

The Wyandot acquiesced in the trapper's proposition, and a moment later the spot was deserted.

Silver Hand belonged to the same nation that besieged Fort Strong with malicious intent. During the Revolutionary War the Wyandots divided; a faction headed by the celebrated Captain Pipe aided the British, while the minor division, under the leadership of White Eyes, sided with the colonies. The factions refused to come together after the war, so when the second trouble with English oppression sought the combat of lead and steel, the unreconciled Indians resumed their old relations. The English Wyandots, led by Splitlog and Roundhead joined Proctor's forces, while the friends of the United States opposed them. To the latter party Silver Hand belonged.

He was present at the encounter of Hull, but effected his escape after that catastrophe, and hastened to his old hunting-grounds—the firelands.

The white trapper and his staunch red ally reached the vicinity of the proscribed cabin during that period of darkness preceding dawn.

The skies were darkened overhead, for the moon had disappeared, and the scene was made quite dismal by the ominous hooting of a great owl perched upon the cone of the hut.

"Things are too still here for me, Silver Hand," whispered the trapper, in his cautious tone, when they had halted near the solitary hut. "I've come home at all times o' nights and mornin's, but never afore hev I see'd an owl on the roof. Jest listen to 'im. Why I kin hear 'im say 'go away' as plainly as I hear his voice. No, chief, I don't rush into the old hut jist now. We're on the edge of a trap!"

Silver Hand did not appear to hear the trapper's words.

His body was bent forward, and he was trying to discern the minutiae of the cabin and its immediate vicinity.

For the period of an hour the twain crouched, like bowlders, in their place of concealment, and then Wolf-Cap moved forward, leaving the Indian to await his return.

He approached the cabin until the owl suddenly vacated his perch, and hied away to the forest. Quickly but noiselessly, then, the trapper returned to his ally.

"Owl gone," said Silver Hand, before the white man could find a tongue. "Who scared 'im?"

"That's jest what I'm goin' to tell you, chief. My cabin is inhabited. I know it, and somebody from the inside frightened that owl. I know that the bird didn't leave of his own accord, and he didn't see a mouse, either. Now, I'm going to find out who's taken possession of the hut."

Thereupon a series of snake-like movements were inaugurated by the couple, who succeeded in passing around the cabin without discovering a foe.

Whoever was in the hut kept very quiet, and the mystery deepened with each succeeding moment.

His dog's silence increased Wolf-Cap's suspicion of foul-play. Yellow Dick had always greeted his return with a peculiar cry; but now the silence of death reigned, and the trapper had touched the wall of his old home without eliciting any noise from the dog.

A second inspection of the clearing and adjacent forest followed the first, and then Wolf-Cap turned suddenly upon the Indian, with compressed lips.

"I won't stand it any longer," he said, sternly. "The rascal's got to show himself now. Watch everywhere, chief, while I oust 'im. If I don't do it, the Night-Hawks will."

The last sentence was spoken in an undertone; and with a quantity of light brushwood the trapper moved toward the cabin.

By the help of steps cut in the logs he ascended to the roof, and deposited his burden between the dry clapboards. Then he sprinkled a quantity of powder among the combustible stuff, and ignited the whole with his flints.

"Now!" he exclaimed, springing to the ground and glancing up at the fire taking firm hold on the clapboards. "Now, I fancy as how the fellow will show himself."

His surmises proved correct.

The tenants of his cabin did show themselves. The roof of the cabin was soon in a blaze, and the twain watched the door with ready rifles. A lurid light overspread the clearing, and bathed the bosom of the river in romantic beauty.

By and by the trapper began to think that, after all, he had surmised incorrectly, for the howls of a dog emanated from the burning building. Silver Hand listened to the cries, the suspicious part of his nature fully aroused, and himself undecided how to act.

Wolf-Cap wanted to save his dog, and the Indian noted the working of his face in the firelight that stole to their retreat.

"Silver Hand, I've been taken in," said Belt, suddenly. "I can't hear Dick howl that way,

By Huron! he sha'n't cry for mercy when I am about!"

"But why he keep still so long?" retorted Silver Hand, quickly. "Trapper answer that if he kin!"

It is doubtful whether Wolf-Cap caught the gist of the Wyandot's sentences, for he jerked his arm from the red fingers that encircled it, and rushed in to the firelight.

The daring trapper had reached the path that led from his door to a spring near the river, when he suddenly paused.

A strange and suspicious voice beyond the logs had startled him.

It sounded like a man's voice, and his acute senses had already shaped it into the words, "All ready."

He had not time to turn to join Silver Hand nor to signal him. He was within six feet of the cabin door, and was looking to his rifle, when the ponderous oaken portal swung wide, and five stalwart fellows threw themselves upon him.

They—the Night-Hawks—were the tenants of his cabin!

He retreated a step, and delivered a shot that stretched one man upon the ground, and then, after a desperate struggle, he was secured and his weapons taken from him.

Silver Hand lent no assistance to his friend; and his assistance would have availed the trapper nothing. Therefore the chief's disappearance was not a sign of cowardice; on the contrary it was a sign of good judgment, big with assurances of future help.

"So, cabin-burner, you have bid defiance to the Night-Hawks," said the spokesman of the outlaws, pointing to the paper still visible on the cabin door: "No block-house shall shelter me. I spare not, and no mercy ask."

A wild laugh greeted this quotation from the trapper's defiance, and the outlaws crowded near him.

"Men, I mean every word I have written on my door," he said, calmly. "There war nine of ye; there ar' but eight now," and here his glance fell upon the man whom he had shot dead. "I war willin' to take the odds ag'in' me, for I am no illegal squatter, and I hate outlaws. Royal Funk, I am free to confess that you've got the upper hand now."

"And I'm going to keep it, Card Belt," replied the desperado, with a smile. "I posted a fair warning on your door last night. 'Fly or die,' it said. You would not fly, so—"

"I must die, eh?"

"Just so."

"When—now?"

"No. We're going to take you down to the Indians at Fort Strong, and I guess the Night-Hawks will treat the settlers to a public execution. You and Silver Hand played it on us to-night. We were following the Armstrongs when you called us back."

"So you came down here and hid in the old cabin?"

"Yes."

"Whar's my dog?"

"In the house."

A twitch of pain followed by an angry pallor,

came to the trapper's lips, and the light of vengeance flashed in his eyes.

"Come, Frank, let's be goin'," said one of the outlaws at this juncture. "'Tis gettin' day, an' Splitlog may need us at Strong's. We want to be there at the death."

"For that moment you must wait a long time," said Wolf-Cap, addressing the leader of the Night-Hawks. "Strong's is prepared to stand a desperate siege."

"True; but its fate is inevitable. Card Belt, so sure as the sun rises this day, Strong's fort shall be given to the flames, and its inmates, all save one, to the tomahawk. We are determined to depopulate 'the fire-lands.' How can it escape?"

"It can! it shall!" cried the trapper. "But," and his tone softened, "but you say that one person in Strong's shall not die. Pray, Royal Funk, who is thus favored?"

"A certain woman—my lady-love," said the outlaw, striking a ridiculous attitude, with his head thrown back, and his thumbs inserted into the sides of his hunting-frock just below the armpits. "What! didn't you know I was in love, Wolf-Cap?"

"No."

"Why, all these brave fellows know it. They've patted me on the back and said, 'Go it, Roy.' But the mirth of the whole matter is, Belt, that I've never told my love to her. She's ignorant of my passion, and you see I must get her out of Strong's so as to breathe it softly into her ears. Old Levi might object; but *I generally marry orphans!*"

Despite his anticipations, Wolf-Cap started when the identity of the outlaw's love was declared.

What! should Royal Funk, the Night-Hawk captain, possess Huldah Armstrong?

Not, thought Wolf-Cap, if he could prevent him. But he was under sentence of death, and stood in the shadow of the Terror's wing.

Half an hour after the capture of Wolf-Cap, the Night-Hawks started to join the besiegers of Strong's fort.

CHAPTER V.

THE OUTCROPPING OF TREASON.

WHEN the flush of day broke upon Strong's fort, not a foe was to be seen.

The numerous stumps in the clearing sheltered no feathered head; but the whites knew that their enemies had not raised the siege. The greater portion of the dusky besiegers had withdrawn to the river-bank, while large numbers lay behind the hill, in the rear of the fort.

In the opinion of several settlers, the perilous situation of affairs called for a council of war, and accordingly Captain Strong, much against his will, was induced to convene such an assembly. The council met in the lower room of the fort.

"Men," said Strong, who could not conceal his ill-humor, "as I have said, I see no necessity for this council. I thought I was director of affairs here, and when Indians are to be dealt with, I know what to do. But I will listen to any suggestions you may offer, and, if I like, will adopt them."

Several old "fire-lands" men shook their

heads gravely at the captain's words; but made no reply.

Mark Harmon, the young frontiersman, opened the council.

"In the first place," he said, "we need a new well."

"We have a well, sir," said Strong, tartly.

"You seem to forget that we have depended on the river for much water. That supply is effectually cut off now, and our sole well will not supply the demand in case the fort should be set on fire with blazing arrows. We are in for a desperate siege; the result of the gate battle has exasperated our foes, and they leave no hellish contrivance for our capture untried. I look for terrible times to-night."

"And you will not be disappointed, Harmon," said an old gray-haired settler. "We stand on the edge of a crater."

"Gentlemen, I anticipate but little hardship," said Strong, who had listened to the young scout with a clearly defined sneer. "The Wyandots will abandon the siege before two days, for there are other forts weaker than ours. Throop's, Martin's, and Westfall's cannot withstand a siege. Knowing this, the Indians will desert us for them; then, during their absence, we can strengthen our own resources."

"Suppose, captain, that an attack should be made to-night, and our roof be set on fire," said Levi Armstrong. "'Tis said that there are but two feet of water in the well now, and none flowing in."

"The statement is not correct," retorted Strong, quickly. "Yesterday I fathomed four feet of water, and more was entering. The well is a good one and cannot be dipped dry. I know whereof I speak; therefore my positiveness, gentlemen."

The council broke up without a command being given for a new well. A number of the settlers sided with Zebulon Strong; but a wary few felt that the proposed well was an absolute want.

However, Mark Harmon set a guard over their water supply, and each family received a certain quantity of the precious fluid.

"Do you think we will be attacked to-night, Mr. Harmon?"

The speaker's mellow tones denoted her to be Huldah Armstrong, and she looked anxiously into the borderer's face as she asked the question. They stood near a port-hole that looked at the hills, behind whose bare summit the sun had just disappeared.

"I look for bloodshed before dawn," he said. And then glancing through the port he quickly changed the subject. "But your run for life was perilous."

"Yes; and Mr. Harmon, father says we owe our lives to your daring. Therefore, let me thank you."

He blushed to the temples and averted his eyes, which had returned to her face.

"No thanks, Miss Armstrong. The brave fellows who fought at the gates are the heroes, not I. But I am rejoiced to see you safe after such a noble run for life. But—"

"A flag—a flag!" was the cry that broke the youth's sentence, and drew his eye to the musket port again.

"As I live, Miss Armstrong, our foes are treating us to a flag of truce," he said, his eyes riveted upon several figures that had suddenly appeared on the top of the hill. "This is an action by me entirely unexpected. What can it mean?"

Captain Strong was soon notified of the approach of the flag, and watched it through one of the openings.

His face worked strangely while he looked, and there was the light of vengeance in his sloe-black eyes. But he kept his face near the port, so that no one in the fort could study its expressions.

"If they demand a surrender, of course you will refuse to comply, captain," ventured an old settler, who stood near the borderman.

"Instantly, with a face crimsoned with rage, Zebulon Strong wheeled from the little embrasure.

"Am I to be dictated to on every hand?" he cried, appealing to the inmates of the apartment. "If I am captain here merely in name, I want to know it. I know a thing or two, and if I am to be advised by every frightened man and woman in the fort, you can take my broken sword, and elect another commander. What! surrender to yon horde of butchers? Never. When they take Fort Strong, there shall be no living soul to torture."

A loud cheer greeted Strong's words, and cries of, "We want no other captain!" "Do what you please!" resounded on every side.

So the officer sheathed the Revolutionary sword which he had drawn, and turned to see that the bearers of the flag of truce had halted about twenty yards from the palisades.

"Ho! Captain Strong," came a loud, clear voice from the little group, and it was seen that the speaker was a white man clad in the full scarlet uniform of a British officer.

"Well, what is wanting?" answered Strong, through the embrasure.

"You are surrounded by nine hundred Indians, and four hundred of his Majesty's troops," said the spokesman of the flag-bearers. "Colonel O'Neill, commander of the combined forces, desires to spare the effusion of noble blood, and therefore summons you to surrender at once."

"Upon what terms?" asked Strong.

"Your people will be permitted to depart in peace; but the fort, of course, will be destroyed," said the Briton.

"Nine hundred Indians and four hundred British," said Strong, turning to his men after the Englishman's last words. "I did not think the odds were so terrible."

"The soldier lies!" cried Levi Armstrong, stepping forward. "He has spoken to terrify us, and the quarter we would receive is the quarter given to Captain Heald at Chicago. Bordermen, remember that massacre of men, women and children. Shall we surrender?"

"No! no!" rung on every side, and Captain Strong's face assumed the hue of ashes.

"What is your answer?" cried the English officer, his impatience manifest in his voice. "Colonel O'Neill pledges his word of honor as a soldier of his Majesty's army, that the tomahawk shall be withheld in the event of a quick surrender. He can control the Wyandots, and he

will. If the commander of your fort is Zebulon Strong, he then knows Colonel Argent O'Neill to be a gentleman."

"Colonel Argent O'Neill—I know him," said the captain. "But my men refuse to surrender."

"Colonel O'Neill speaks to Captain Strong—not to his men," returned the soldier, proudly.

"Go back to your commander and tell him that Fort Strong will be the abode of the dead when he takes it. We know a Briton's promise to be but another name for a lie."

The last speaker was Mark Harmon, and his words were applauded as he turned from the embrasure.

"I was about to answer him," said Strong, in a hoarse voice.

"He is answered!" was the young borderman's reply.

The captain bit his lips and turned to the port again as the British officer spoke:

"The consequences be upon your own head, Captain Strong," he said. "My colonel will give the conduct of the siege to the Indians now."

Thereupon the speaker turned abruptly on his heel, and the flag of truce disappeared over the brow of the hill.

A minute later the flash of a musket and the thud of a bullet told the defenders of Fort Strong that the battle had opened.

A single gun from the fort sent a defiance to the hidden foes, and for the space of an hour quiet reigned.

Captain Strong now seemed eager to defend the block-house to the last, and exchanged words of encouragement with the settlers as he inspected the defense.

"Well, we're in for it, now, Morgan," he said, in a low tone, to a burly fellow stationed near the gate where, a few hours before, so much blood had been shed. "They refuse to surrender, and now your part of the work comes. Are you ready?"

"Yes," answered the sentry, glancing around.

"The darkness will aid me."

"Can you scale the wall?"

"Easily from the inside here."

"Then make haste. You know the signal. I will do the rest."

Captain Strong slipped a piece of paper into the guard's hand as he spoke the last word, and turned away.

The next moment Morgan Sawyer scaled the pickets, and dropped to the ground on the outer side!

Then he ran toward the hill under cover of the intense darkness. For dense clouds obscured the sky from horizon to horizon, thus effectually blotting out the light of the moon.

Captain Strong had hardly gained the interior of the fort, when Sawyer's escape was discovered.

"What! a traitor among us!" cried the commander, counterfeiting indignation and surprise to an admirable degree. "And at the gate, too! Harmon and Cole, at once to the portals! I know *you* can be trusted. Matt Hunter, you will take Isaac's place at the well. Curse Morg Sawyer! May the fiends scalp him for his treachery!"

The commander's wish was echoed by more than one determined settler, who waited the onslaught of the savages.

The men at the embrasures listened and looked for their foes, and Zebulon Strong walked uneasily about, listening all the time for a certain sound.

Once or twice he pushed the long black locks from his ears, and paused for a moment at one of the ports.

Suddenly a pistol-shot came from the hill, then another, and another.

Strong was descending to the first floor of the block-house when the sounds fell upon his ears, and he paused in the center of the ladder with a smile.

"Morg has succeeded," he said, in the lowest of mutterings. "Now let Hunter do his duty."

The pistol-shots died away, and no volley of musketry followed.

In the dim light of the candles old Levi Armstrong looked at Mark Harmon and moved to his side.

"What do you think now?" he whispered.

"The foe on the hill is signaling the foe by the river."

"Thus you interpret the shots?"

"Yes."

"I differ. They are the record of Morg Sawyer's treason. This roof still shelters his confederates."

The young hunter caught the settler's arm.

"For heaven's sake, whom do you suspect?" he asked. "Tell me. We must act at once if we have traitors in our midst."

The old man bent nearer to reply, when the whiz of a burning arrow startled him, and caused him to spring to the embrasure.

But the fiery missile missed the fort, and quivered in a stump near the river.

"Now take the buckets, men!" cried the voice of Captain Stone. "We must fight fire with water!"

Instantly a score of stout leathern buckets were brought into requisition, and the boards that covered the well were removed.

"A little water for the women first," said Levi Armstrong, dropping one of the buckets into the well by means of a rope.

Down went the receptacle, and the men stood about with anxious faces. They wanted to know how much water was in the well, for upon a generous supply of the fluid their lives and the lives of their wives and little ones depended.

At last the bucket was heard to strike water, and old Levi looked up almost despairingly.

"There's scarcely two feet o' water in the well," he said.

"I fathomed four last night," said Zebulon Strong, confidently. "But quick! draw up, Armstrong, and let more buckets be lowered. The burning arrows shoot from the hill like meteors!"

The next instant the water was at the top, and the settler threw the rope to Matt Hunter.

"This is for the women," said the old man; "but I'll taste it first."

He raised the bucket to his lips, but a moment later ejected the mouthful of water which he had taken, and started toward the well with flashing eyes.

"Let nobody swallow a drop of that water!" he cried. "It has been poisoned, and the prisoner is still sheltered by the roof of Fort Strong!"

The effect of the startling words was utterly indescribable. It could not have been equaled by the sudden dropping of a thunderbolt into the fort.

CHAPTER VI.

WITHOUT THE FORT.

DURING the brief period of time that intervened between the battle at the gates and the discharge of blazing arrows at the fort itself, the beautiful fire-lands had not escaped the vengeance of the settlers' enemies.

The deserted cabins were given over to the mercies of the torch, and the work of montas perished in a few hours. Then red burners were accompanied by British soldiers, who outdid the fiends of the forest in heartless ferocity, and at nightfall they returned to the besiegers loaded with plunder and gluttoned with diabolism.

"Well, what are you going to do with your man, now that you've got him?" asked Colonel O'Neil of Royal Funk, when the outlaw reappeared at the British headquarters, fresh from the work of destruction above referred to.

"What am I going to do with 'im, colonel? Why, I'll tell you. It was my intention to execute 'im on top o' the hill, yesterday; but, I've changed my mind. There's a girl in Fort Strong—a girl whom I want—Huldah Armstrong, and strange to say, Card Belt wants her, too."

"Ah! I see," said the British officer, with a smile. "He is your rival."

"Yes, colonel; but I hold the best hand now, as you will admit by glancing at the cards. We are bound to take the fort."

"It will be ours before another sunset. You know what Strong is doing?"

"Andrews told me, an hour since. But can we rely on him?"

"We can," said O'Neill, assuringly, and with emphasis. "Strong, at the heart, is a coward, yet he will do desperate things. He was a secret Tory in Herkimer county, New York, during the Revolution, and while campaigning in that region, I became acquainted with him. More than once he furnished me with valuable information concerning the movements of the enemy, and I believe that the rebels never suspected him. I tell you we have a friend in Fort Strong, without whom we could do nothing. For Splitlog was about to relinquish the siege when the deserter reached our camp with Strong's proposition. Now the Indians will stay with us. But the thread of your story has been broken. I want to know what you are going to do with the squatter."

"Oh, I'll tell you in a few words," answered the leader of the Night-Hawks. "I'm going to marry Huldah Armstrong in his presence, after the Wyandot fashion, and then—why, then I'm going to dispose of him."

"After the Wyandot fashion, also, I suppose," smiled the colonel.

"Just so," said Funk, returning the smile. "When do you open the battle?"

"The Indians are preparing the fiery arrows now," was the reply. "Ha! there goes one, already!" and the colonel's hand directed the outlaw's gaze to a blazing arrow shooting toward the fort.

It was quickly followed by another and another, until a perfect shower of fiery missiles rained upon the fort.

But the firm and dry clap-boards that formed the roof resisted nobly, and the arrows rebounded and dropped into the yard below.

"We must get the arrows *under* the boards," said O'Neill, turning to the chief, Splitlog, who stood at his side. "Send some of your bravest Wyandots nearer the fort, and tell them to shoot their red arrows beneath the roof."

"Indians get shot down if they go nearer fort," returned the chief, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Let white chief send *his* men."

O'Neill bit his lip with anger.

"Who proposed this attack?" he cried, with flashing eyes. "I brought my men hither at your request. They were not to risk their lives. If your Indians are brave they can fire the fort."

Splitlog turned away without another word, and a few minutes later a number of fiery arrows were seen to ascend almost from beneath the very palisades. Several remained in the roof, and Colonel O'Neill clapped his hands over the demon's success.

Thus far during the battle not a shot had been fired from the fort. The allies wondered at this silence; but they were not cognizant of the thrilling scenes being enacted behind the strong walls.

Lashed to a tree on the river's bank, and strongly guarded by three white men and two Wyandots, Wolf-Cap saw the discharge of the fiery missiles. Since his arrival among the allies he had seen nothing of Royal Funk; but he knew that that worthy had absented himself but temporarily.

"We'll get the fort to-night," said one of the outlaws, turning to Wolf-Cap, during the flight of the blazing shafts.

"Sir, you don't know who defends it," the trapper said, quickly, and with pride. "Yon walls protect the bravest men in New Connecticut."

"But, Captain Strong—what do you think of *him*?" asked the outlaw, with a curious smile.

"He has completely deceived me."

The white guards exchanged significant glances.

"What do you know about him, Belt?"

"I know that he intends to betray a lot of women and children to the tender mercies of the tomahawk. I've seen Morg Sawyer in your camp. I heard the three pistol-shots on the hill. I have heard something about Strong's antecedents, and, putting things together, I kin read the blackest tale of treason on record."

"Wouldn't you like to be in the fort, just now?" taunted Sam Cole, the Night-Hawk.

The trapper's eyes flashed; but he said nothing.

"But how about that notice you put on your door for us? You said that no walls should protect you while you fought us."

"I intend to adhere to that declaration," said Wolf-Cap, firmly.

"So you wouldn't creep into Fort Strong if we war to let you go?"

"I would not!"

The outlaws laughed derisively.

"I've a mind to try you," said Cole, drawing his knife and glancing at his fellow-guards.

Wolf-Cap said nothing.

The place where they stood was thickly studied with young trees and tall grass, the latter much soiled by human feet. A fire some distance down the river threw a weird light over the scene; but toward the fort, in its river front, the depth of darkness prevailed.

The Indian guards gazed at the outlaw with an immobility of countenance, and when he stepped toward the trapper with uplifted knife, they did not interpose a hand. They had lately taken their stations as Wolf-Cap's guards, and had watched the helpless man with vigilant eyes.

"I say I've a mind to try you, Wolf-Cap," reiterated the outlaw.

"No, it won't do, Sam," suddenly cried another, springing forward and laying his brawny hand on Cole's shoulder. "He'll escape if you cut his cords. What do a squatter's words amount to? Let him be!"

For a moment Cole glared fiercely upon the speaker, and then sullenly dropped the knife again.

"I've heard that Card Belt is a man of his word," he said. "And I want to try 'im."

With the last word the outlaw shook the hand from his shoulder, and stepped toward the trapper again.

"Don't do it, Sam."

"I will!"

"You sha'n't!"

The knife of the last speaker suddenly leaped from its leathern sheath, and he advanced upon Cole, who turned and pushed him back.

"Stand off, Duke White," were Cole's menacing words. "I don't want a difficulty with you. I know what I am doing. I'll try Wolf-Cap if I wish to."

"You shall not!" and White tried to step between Cole and the captive.

But, with a fierce oath, Cole hurled Duke from the tree. Duke recovered in a moment, and with all the baser passions of his soul fully aroused, he sprung at his Titan comrade.

Cole saw the movement, and received the attack with the knife, for it was apparent that the blood of a Night-Hawk had to be shed by a brother's hand.

I say that Cole met the attack with the knife, and blood flowed from the wound inflicted in Duke White's breast by the shining steel. The next moment they had grappled, and swayed to and fro in the struggle of life and death like contending giants.

The third white guard started forward to strike Cole with clubbed rifle, when one of the Indians, with a quick glance at his companion, leaped toward the tree.

A knife flashed in the brave's hands, and when it descended Wolf-Cap sprung from the sycamore—free! He saw the second savage hurl the third guard into the murky waves of the Huron, and glanced at the struggling Night-Hawks, now on the ground,

"Wolf-Cap run down the river," said the trapper's deliverer, quickly pointing down the stream.

"No! I go to the fort, Silver Hand. Seek the black cave. I'll meet you there at dawn. Quick! They come."

He spoke in the Wyandot tongue, and the next instant bounded toward the fort. He glided rapidly through the gloom, avoiding the numerous stumps, and yells on the river-bank told him that the deed just enacted there had been discovered.

But he ran on, unarmed, save with a knife, which Silver Hand had thrust into his grip, and he struck the ponderous gate of the palisade twice with the bony hilt.

"Guard! guard!" he shouted, and then he heard the sentry speak to some one behind the pickets.

"Listen! I know that voice."

"'Tis me—Wolf-Cap," called the trapper quickly upon the guard's words. "I don't want to get in. Captain Strong is a traitor; he has promised to betray you into the hands of the Indians!"

A moment of silence followed. The trapper had paused for breath.

"Your roof is on fire. Put it out, and see to the traitor. Hold out like men. You'll get help from outside, by-and-by."

Then Wolf-Cap turned from the gate and started toward the river.

The darkness favored his flight. As yet no attack had been made upon the fort from the stream. The major portion of the besiegers were on the hill, the summit of which was on a level with the embrasures, into which the foe could shoot with effect.

Thus far the enemy had trusted to the blazing arrows; but, as the trapper gained the stream, a volley was poured into the block-house.

The next moment it was returned by the besieged, and numerous cries told Wolf-Cap that some of the foe had fallen.

"I don't like to leave the boys," said the trapper, sadly, pausing in his flight, and listening to the battle which had now opened furiously. "And Huldah is yonder in the midst of it all. But the Indians wait for me at the cave. Three can do more than one. I wish the two war here now; then—"

There was the quick, sharp snapping of a twig, and Silver Hand and his assistant stood before the trapper.

"We no go to cave," said Silver Hand. "Hide here 'while to watch fight. But look, Wolf-Cap! roof all on fire. Why don't pale-faces put it out? They got water in fort."

"Yes, but the traitor has disabled them somehow. I'm afraid it's all day with the brave fellows. But they sha'n't die alone!" and the trapper started forward.

"Silver Hand and Golden Cheek go with Wolf-Cap," said the Wyandot, and a moment later the trio were hurrying toward the seemingly doomed structure.

That side of the roof which looked to the hill was in a furious blaze, which threw a lurid glare upon the battle-ground, and the discharges of musketry by both parties resembled a pitched battle.

Suddenly the artillery of Heaven added its thunder to the fight, and great drops of rain began to fall thick and fast from the inky clouds.

But let us return to the fort and see what followed Levi Armstrong's discovery of the poisoning of the well.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WORK OF A LIE.

THE settler's eyes fell upon Zebulon Strong as the startling words written at the conclusion of chapter five rung from his lips.

But the captain stood the scrutiny unflinchingly, and started forward with drawn sword.

"The traitor shall die!" he cried. "Let every one look to his neighbor, and watch him closely. As for myself, I believe that Morg Sawyer is the villain; but he is beyond our power. Men, to the lower floor with picks; we'll dig another well immediately. By the help of God! we'll hold out against the red and white fiends until fresh water can be struck!"

He turned away as he finished, and was ordering a number of men below to inaugurate the digging of a new well, when Huldah Armstrong bounded toward the settler and touched his arm.

"Father," she said, in a cautious tone, "Captain Strong is the traitor. I was standing near the logs a moment since, and heard Wolf-Cap at the gate. He told the guards that our captain had betrayed us into the hands of the savages."

The next instant Levi jerked his arm from Huldah's grip and started toward Strong, who was handing buckets of water to the men on the roof.

"Men," he cried, in thunderous tones, "treason must not thrive here! Captain Strong, you must consider yourself the prisoner of the garrison."

Before turning to the old settler, the traitor passed the bucket he was in the act of lifting to the nearest man.

He retained a wonderful self-composure.

"I submit, if it be the will of the men," he said, calmly. "Heaven forefend that I should seek to betray these women and children into merciless hands;" and he glanced around on the swarthy faces revealed by the tallow dips.

"Let the captain help us," cried several voices; but old Levi silenced the speakers with a look.

"I'd like to, but it won't do," he said. "The evidence is strong against him. I saw him whispering to Morg Sawyer at the gate, a minute before that dog's desertion, and Wolf-Cap has just shouted over the palisades that he is a traitor."

For the first time the captain's face grew pale, and Levi proceeded to disarm him.

"I'm sorry for all this, Cap," he said, sympathetically; "but you see, we've got to do it, and—"

"Arrest Captain Strong!" interrupted a sturdy young settler, whose head shot above the hatchway at this juncture. "Wolf-Cap has just halloed over the gate that he is a traitor. Ah! so you've already caught the dog! Zeb Strong, for a shilling I'd strike you stiff and cold on these boards. I've two sisters here, and

to think that you would give them over to the tomahawk!"

The youth towered before the suspected man with flashing eyes and leveled gun, and other weapons were drawn to shed the captain's blood.

"No, no, boys; he's not condemned yet," said Levi Armstrong, pushing the weapons aside. "We'll tend to him after the fight."

A guard of several men was placed over the captain, who was taken below where strong arms threw up the earth in great heaps.

Above, the settlers fought the flames at the risk of their lives, for the foe were raining bullets from the hill and the battle had opened in terrible earnest.

Suddenly a startling cry came from the vicinity of the well.

"No more water!"

And the words were echoed on every side. Mothers pressed their babes to their breasts, and told the little ones that the last drop of water had been drawn from the well!

"What of the fire?" shouted Armstrong to the men on the roof.

"If we had more water we could master it," was the reply. "Without water we are doomed."

Then he leaped to the gangway and cried to the well-diggers below:

"No water yet?"

"No!" was the despairing answer.

The fire-fighters threw the buckets from the roof and clambered down after them. But all who went up did not come down. Several had been shot by the enemy, and lay dead on the ground between the fort and the palisades.

Now every one believed that the fort was doomed to destruction. The clapboards on the western roof were blazing furiously, and cinders were falling among the besieged.

All at once a peal of thunder, rattling over their heads, shook the fort to its very foundation, and ejaculations burst from every throat.

"God be praised!" cried a woman, bursting from the shuddering throng with her babe in her arms. "He is sending the rain to save us. Praised be His holy name!"

A moment later and the storm clouds broke, and great gray drops fell splattering in the fire.

The rain was greeted with a hearty cheer that reached the ears of the besiegers, and every faint heart took hope. For a moment the rain descended in scattered quantities, then came down in gigantic and irresistible sheets.

"We are saved—hurrah! hurrah!" cried the younger settlers, stepping back from the ports and slipping in the blood and water that covered the puncheons. "Open the well and let the water in."

Sure enough, the crimson demon was yielding to the deluge, and every one saw in their deliverance the hand of Deity.

"We're not out of the fire yet," said Levi Armstrong, calmly, for to him command of the fort had been given by unanimous consent. "After the rain we must fight again, then no roof can protect us—the fire-arrows will drop among us. But we must to work. Remove the ammunition below to a dry place, and let our dead be laid aside and the wounded cared for."

Brave men sprung with eagerness to the task,

Several kegs of powder were carried below, and the loss of the garrison looked after.

It was discovered that it had suffered quite severely during the battle. From behind stumps the Indians had fired into ports, distinctly revealed by the wildly-leaping flames of the roof, and with fatal effect. The majority of the stricken settlers were killed outright—shot through the head—while every wound was dangerous. Twenty-one men had fallen, including the loss at the gate and another, Morgan Sawyer, had deserted.

The well-diggers struck water as the storm broke over the fort; but they did not cease their labors, for they knew that it would not last long—a summer shower, but a furious, a saving one.

"Miss Armstrong, can I trust you?"

"You can."

"Then come with me."

The first speaker was Matt Hunter, the man whom Captain Strong had placed over the well after Sawyer's defection.

He was a small, wiry man, rather prepossessing in appearance, and had fought like a tiger with the water-buckets.

Huldah Armstrong drew from his look that he had something in view for the good of the garrison, and followed him to the gangway.

But, as the settler had put his foot on the first round of the ladder, the face of a strange man was revealed below, and he started back.

"Wolf-Cap!" he shouted to the busy men and women about him. "Wolf-Cap is here!"

Immediately the cry of "Wolf-Cap" resounded throughout the fort, and the next minute the Night-Hawks' foe appeared above the hatch.

"Welcome, welcome, neighbor Belt," cried old Levi, springing to the trapper. "Bloody times, these."

"Ay, ay," said Wolf-Cap, quickly. "But to the ports. This is the darkest hour of the night. The foe is crawling through the storm both from the river and hill. Thank heaven! the rain has saved your fort."

The settlers sprung to their places.

"The demons carry ladders," continued Wolf-Cap, "and they'll make a desperate effort to carry the palisades by storm."

Matt Hunter and Huldah did not wait to hear the trapper's words, but hurried below and paused before the guard at the lower door.

"You can't get out here," said the sentry.

"Can't," echoed Hunter. "We're on a mission from our new captain."

"True, miss?" asked the soldier, looking at Huldah.

"Mr. Hunter should know," she answered, and the heavy door was unbolted, and they stepped into the yard.

"Miss Armstrong, I am on a secret mission for your father," he said, when they heard the door shut violently. "I can not disclose it yet, so please bear with me. We must now relieve the gate guards."

He walked rapidly toward the gate, where three sturdy settlers stood.

"Jones, Vanderberg and Poston, I believe," he said, pausing before the trio, whose forms were just visible in the gloom.

"Yes," answered a rough voice, "them's we. What's wanting?"

"Our new captain wants Vanderberg and Poston to the council up-stairs. Wolf-Cap advocates a change of tactics. We—Miss Armstrong and I—will guard the gate with Jones, until relieved. We were sent hither for that duty."

Matt Hunter paused; but the two men hesitated. Since the arrest of Zebulon Strong, they did not know whom to trust, and theirs was the most important post connected with the safety of the fort.

"No doubt other strength will be sent hither on your appearance above," said Hunter, uneasily. "Your voices are needed in the council. You can leave your muskets here; but I think we will not need 'em. Wolf-Cap reports the foe under cover."

His last words decided the guards; they leaned their muskets against the stockade and left the gate.

Without difficulty they gained the interior of the fort, and paused a moment to inquire into the progress of the well-diggers.

Then they ascended the ladder and appeared in the battle-room. The storm had spent its fury by this time, but the wind was flaring the dips and imparting a demi-gloom to the entire interior of the place. Still, the light enabled the sentries to see men at the port-holes, and the women were scrubbing the floor with bedding. There was nothing that looked like a council of war.

"Where's the cap'n?" asked Vanderberg, touching a woman's arm—and the dame could not repress a cry when she looked up into his white face.

"Here," called a lusty voice from a darkened corner, and a tall form advanced toward the guard. "I'm here—what's wanting?" and then the commander caught sight of Vanderberg's face. "Roger Vanderberg, what are you doing here?" he cried, and his hand closed on the settler's arm. "Your post is at the outer gate. What can have brought you hither? Speak! These are nights when traitors are abroad."

The guard, now thoroughly alarmed and frightened, could not find his tongue for a moment.

"And Poston, you here too? Who is at the gate?"

"Sir, your daughter and Matt Hunter," cried Vanderberg, with considerable fire in his tone. "He sent me up to the council."

"Council? there's no council here," and the old settler's cheeks suddenly grew pale. "I never sent for you—never! Matt Hunter must mean something terrible. We'll go down and see."

He sprung to the hatch, and quickly disappeared, followed by the sentries.

The lower guard opened the door without a challenge, and the trio passed into the yard.

There Levi Armstrong's worst fears were realized. The gate was deserted and stood ajar!

Deserted? No! At the foot of one of the posts lay the body of a man.

"Heavens! Huldah is gone!" cried the settler, staggering from the scene, for a moment completely unmanned.

For a moment only.

"The gate! the gate!" he cried, springing forward, but Vanderberg and Poston had foreseen the danger.

Their strong arms closed the ponderous structure as a hundred arrows buried their flinty heads in the boards.

The gate was then barricaded in a jiffy.

"Listen! They're about to storm us," said Vanderberg.

"Quick, then! Summon thirty men hither!" shouted Levi. "We must meet them here first. 'Twill be daylight soon, thank heaven!"

Vanderberg sprung to execute the task assigned him, and the old settler bent over the form lying at the gate.

It was poor Jones. His skull had been crushed by the butt of a musket, and he was quite dead.

"The old fort swarms with traitors," said Armstrong, looking up at Poston. "Hunter was Strong's confederate. Now we'll meet the storming dogs."

He muttered the last sentence as a body of men emerged from the fort.

"Huldah isn't gone, Armstrong?" said the foremost man, whose wolf-skin cap proclaimed his personality.

"Gone—gone, Belt!"

Wolf-Cap looked at the settler, and then gritted his great teeth till they fairly cracked.

"Matt Hunter took the girl along to buy his own liberty," he murmured. "Royal Funk will get her now. But he sha'n't wear her—no! not while my name is Card Belt."

"Nor while mine is Mark Harmon!"

The trapper started, and saw the young borderman standing by his side.

"Your hand on that, boy!" cried the trapper, with a smile, and two hands were clasped and sealed in determination.

"I guess the dogs have gone back to growl," said Belt, glancing up. "They've let the golden moment slip. It's gettin' too light to attack now."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BIT OF MUTINY.

FORT STRONG could not have successfully resisted an assault of the allies on the stockade. The settlers knew this, but were determined that the foe should be met with courage as fierce as his own.

Already the women were arming themselves and their words of encouragement threw more strength into their husbands' arms.

We left Wolf-Cap and the two Indian chiefs hurrying toward the fort, and have also witnessed the former's appearance among the besieged. Before entering, he had tarried a while without for the purpose of watching the enemy. His great heart leaped for joy when the rain began to descend, and beside the gate he dismissed the chiefs with low words, intended for their ears alone.

He heard the foe approach, and learned that they bore ladders which, no doubt, they had constructed beyond the hill during the day, and then he hastened to prepare the settlers for the new danger.

But the sky grew lighter, and the assault

came not. From some cause which the besieged could not fathom, the proposed attack had been suddenly abandoned, and when the light rendered objects distinguishable from the fort, not an enemy could be seen.

But let us follow the fortunes of Huldah Armstrong, and learn why the assault was abandoned.

To all appearances the Indians had been withdrawn from the river; but such was not the case. The light of the burning roof revealed the ground between fort and stream, but not a brave lay behind the stumps. Colonel O'Neill attacked the fort from the hill only, thinking that the garrison might be driven to an attempt to fly to the river and escape by boats. Therefore, he had drawn the Indians to the tall grass on the bank, and during the entire fight not a shot was fired from the ambush.

But the colonel's plans did not succeed.

"Why this delay?" exclaimed the officer, angrily, looking and listening from the summit of the hill where he stood, surrounded by half a dozen Indians and as many English officers. "The assault should have been made ere this."

"We have not heard Funk's signal yet, colonel," answered one of the officers, suggestively.

"Fire and fury! he should have given it five minutes since," and O'Neill looked at a beautiful chronometer which he drew from his bosom. "The truth of the matter is, Funk is crazy after a girl in the fort, and if he can get her, he will let the foe beat us off. Curse the laggard!"

A minute's silence followed the Briton's last words. The signal, whatever it was to have been, did not cleave the cool night air—not a sound came from the fort.

"The jig is up," hoarsely hissed O'Neill, stamping his foot with rage. "Funk's infernal passion for that girl has ruined our plans. Splitlog, is he a specimen of the men you associate with? Go and recall the forces! The day is breaking now, and if our men are not instantly withdrawn, they will be slaughtered like sheep."

The Wyandot sachem left the hill, and presently every besieger relinquished the designed attack.

Colonel O'Neill was livid with rage, and threaten to withdraw his troops.

"Funk is the cause of all this," he thundered to Splitlog. "You should take the villain out and shoot him when he shows his face in camp. But he'll never have the audacity to show his face here. Perhaps he succeeded in getting the girl, and has fled to parts unknown."

"Night-Hawk do bad work, sure," said Splitlog, like the colonel, in no good humor. "He better not come back to braves."

"Killing him won't mend matters; but—"

The interruption that broke the sentence was caused by the sudden appearance of a young Wyandot warrior, who informed the twain that Royal Funk and his Night-Hawks were boldly approaching.

O'Neill and the chief exchanged looks of surprise.

"That man possesses the audacity of the devil," said the colonel. "Now stick to your

word, Splitlog; pay him up. Do not listen to his excuses. If you do, he'll conquer."

White and red occupied the tent of the former, and when they stepped out, they beheld a large body of soldiers and savages approaching.

At the head of the array walked Royal Funk and his remaining Night-Hawks, six in number, for Sam Cole had slain his white adversary at the tree to which Wolf-Cap was bound at the opening of the fort fight, and the second Night-Hawk whom Silver Hand threw into the river on the same occasion, would march no more to deeds of brigandage.

There was a cloud on the outlaw's face as he neared the little group; but he walked boldly erect, unmindful of the fierce looks and muttered epithets that the Indians hurled at him.

At length he halted before the couple at the tent, and looked them calmly in the eye without a word.

"You have come to report," said O'Neill, sullenly and sarcastically.

"With your permission, sir," retorted the Night-Hawk captain.

"If you wish, you may tell the story of your treachery. Though I would rather not hear it, I will listen. You know the disaster you have hurled upon this army."

"I am, to some extent, perhaps, to blame for the non-attack on the stockade. I am willing to take all the blame on my shoulders at any rate. They are strong," and he shrugged them, "and I can carry heavy loads."

"But let the Night-Hawk talk of his dog acts," cried Splitlog, stepping nearer Funk, furious almost beyond control.

"I was about ready to give my signal when we beheld a suspicious figure creeping from the fort to the river. We followed, and captured a man—Matt Hunter by name. He was a deserter and told us much. Captain Strong is a prisoner at the fort. His designs have been discovered. Wolf-Cap is in the fort."

"I thought you held him captive?" said O'Neill at this juncture.

"I did, but Cole wanted to trust his honesty, and Duke White here interfered. They fought, and Cole got the best of Duke; but, after all, Wolf-Cap escaped."

"But what about the man you caught?"

"The boys gave him to the Wyandots by the river. He's yonder now with Sawyer, the other deserter. He was carrying a woman from the fort."

"Stealing a woman, eh? Go on, Roy Funk, this is a romantic story you're telling. Took some hard thinking, no doubt."

An illy-concealed sneer pervaded the officer's words; but the outlaw chief did not appear to notice it.

"We got the girl of course, and," looking at O'Neill, "she's my girl, colonel—Huldah Armstrong."

"This will all do to tell, Roy Funk," said the soldier; "but it won't slip down."

"You'll believe me if I produce the deserter and the girl?" flashed Funk.

"I will, and not until then will I credit a single word you have uttered."

The outlaw turned quickly upon one of his men.

"Jackson, go and bring Hunter and the girl here," he said, in maddened tones.

"You shall see that I haven't lied!" he said, turning to O'Neill again. "Splitlog has enjoyed a long acquaintance with me, and he cannot put his finger on a single lie of mine."

"But what say you in extenuation of your crime of disobeying orders?"

"Circumstances, sir, interposed to check my career, and when I had disposed of my captives you were withdrawing your troops. But, Colonel O'Neill, I want you to understand that I am a free man here. Roy Funk and his fellows do as they please; but for this time I have condescended to be a subordinate. You, sir, are a minority here. Splitlog by superiority of numbers commands."

O'Neill bit his lip and referred the outlaw to the Wyandot for punishment. He felt that Splitlog would rid himself of Funk's presence, and now he devoutly wished the forest freebooter out of his way.

A brief time elapsed between Jackson's disappearance and his return.

A line of knolls or hills encircled the southern side of the fort, and terminated at the river. They enabled the outlaw to perform his errand without being seen by the besieged settlers, and he approached the assemblage with Huldah Armstrong and the treacherous borderman.

"There!" said Funk, in triumph, looking at his prisoners. "Colonel O'Neill, have I lied?"

The British soldier did not reply, for he was looking at the settler's daughter, whose wonderful backwoods beauty was entrancing his Highland-tainted heart.

"What does Night-Hawk want to do with white girl?" asked Splitlog, breaking the silence that followed Funk's speech.

"I intend making her Mrs. Funk, as I have told the colonel," said the outlaw, glancing quickly at the officer as he spoke. "She is mine!"

"But Night-Hawk didn't give signal. He let a squaw run off with his head."

Splitlog's anger was rising again, and O'Neill was secretly rejoicing.

"I know it, chief; but to-night we'll work together."

"Like we did when it was dark before," hissed the Wyandot, and his right arm started back threateningly. "The Night-Hawk is a traitor, and traitors are dogs. He no man at all who'll let blue eyes draw him from duty."

"Well, what is Splitlog going to do about it?"

The question was put calmly, but there was the lurking of a defiant, devil-may-care spirit in the words.

"He going to make example, as the pale-faces say," was the reply. "Little Hickory, take the girl—"

"No you won't!" interrupted the outlaw, and before the chief addressed could advance a step, Jackson threw Huldah Armstrong forward and Funk caught her in his arms.

"I appeal to the braves of the Wyandot nation, and to true English soldiers," he cried, springing upon a fallen tree and looking around over the crowd. "I have fought for the flag of St. George and for the wampum of the Wyandots. I failed in a duty last night, but to-night

we can take the fort. Put yourselves in my place last night. For such a pretty woman as this, who would not have forgotten every thing save love?"

Numerous cheers greeted the outlaw's speech, but Splitlog, with a cloud on his face, advanced toward the log.

"Stop, chief," cried Funk, cocking one of his pistols, and looking down upon the Wyandot. "I don't want to shed blood on this occasion. My men will stand by me—if we go down, 'twill be as the fall of one man."

Stern determination was written on the Night-Hawk's face, and he glanced at Huldah, hanging half-senseless across his left arm.

"Don't give in to him!" whispered O'Neill to Splitlog, who had stopped. "Make an example of the dog!"

The chief was inclined to do so.

"A vote! a vote!" cried the soldiers.

"We'll have no votes on this question!" thundered Colonel O'Neill.

"We will!" answered a stalwart corporal, stepping forward, pistol in hand. "Colonel O'Neill, your men say that Funk's fate shall not be settled by one man."

"Fire and furies, this is mutiny!" and the English sword leaped from its scabbard. "Corporal, who commands the Ninety-first—you or I?"

Corporal Quitman did not reply, but saluted his superior and stepped aside.

"We will vote on Funk's life!" came a cry from the rebellious quarter, and the Indians began to demand a ballot, in their own language.

Colonel O'Neill was shaking with rage.

"Colonel, you had best listen to the men!" ventured Quitman, again.

"Who gave you authority to suggest to me?" roared the epauleted Briton, starting toward the corporal. "Sergeant Wilkinson, arrest the mutineer!"

But the sergeant did not stir.

"What! dare you disobey, too?"

"I dare!" was the quiet response. "Colonel, if a majority of the Wyandots and the old Ninety-first say that Funk's deed deserves death, we will submit. But one man, and he an *Indian*, shall not dictate in such a case as this."

The mutineers applauded the sergeant's words, and Colonel O'Neill stepped back, and gazed with horror into Splitlog's face.

"I know what you want, colonel," said Roy Funk, at this juncture, "and I don't blame you, either, for you don't pick up such a girl as this in the woods every day. Let the red-coats vote, and the Indians, too. If they say I deserve death, you may kill me."

O'Neill looked up at the outlaw, and then turned to the sachem.

"I leave it to you, Splitlog," he said. "Count me out; but Funk should live if he can cower such a man as you!"

CHAPTER IX.

SENT INTO EXILE.

SPLITLOG shrugged his shoulders and turned to his braves and said:

"Splitlog hears the voices of his people," he said. "He will not strike the Night-Hawk until they have pronounced on his fate. He,"

pointing to Funk, "has lived long among the Wyandots; they know him—he is brave."

As the Indian paused, O'Neill stepped forward, and laid his hand on the naked shoulder. The Briton's face was still aflame with rage.

"Say nothing, for nor against him, chief," he said, in the Wyandot tongue. "Tell your braves to say life or death, and that quickly."

He snapped the words out fiercely, and darted a malignant look at Splitlog as he turned away:

"I'll pay you for this, you scarlet dog," he murmured, under his breath. "I'll pay you for lying, see if I don't."

Splitlog smiled contemptuously, and bit his nether lip.

"Down with you, Wyandots," he cried, angrily, flashing his eyes over his armed nation. "Down like wolves, and let the warriors who vote for life hold up their guns."

Like one man the red assembly dropped to the ground, and near two hundred guns were held on high!

A majority voted for life.

"I knew they'd do it," hissed O'Neill. "And Splitlog sanctions the decision. My men shall not vote."

A stern determination clothed the last words, and they were yet quivering on his lips when the chief, with a triumph which his best dissimulative arts could not conceal, turned upon him:

"Now let the red-coats vote," cried Splitlog. "If many of them say 'death,' the waters of the Huron shall roll over the Night-Hawk."

An eager gleam of hope lit up the colonel's eyes at this.

Sword in hand he leaped upon the log near the Night-Hawk captain.

"You who vote for life will advance ten paces westward. Right about—face. Forward march!"

Many a Briton obeyed the military command, and the colonel ordered a sergeant to count the eyes.

Two hundred and one men voted for life, and strange to say, a *like number had kept their places!*

"I vote for death!" said the colonel, when he had informed Splitlog of the even counts; "therefore I make a majority, and the outlaw dies."

"Did Splitlog vote?" cried the chief. "No! he left it to his men. But he will look to the vote of the red-coats. He says that the Night-Hawk shall fly from the land of the Wyandots before the sun sweeps over the bosom of the Huron again, and he shall never return. Does this suit the king's soldier?"

"He should die. We, his own people, say as much," said O'Neill.

"But Indians say, 'Live, Night-Hawk.'" Splitlog must listen to his people; when they say 'No,' he must not say 'Yes.'"

"So be it, then. But he shall not take his captive along."

"Whatever is his he may keep," answered the Indian, and then he looked up at Royal Funk.

"Night-Hawk, you are free to go," he said. "After this night, let these forests hear your tread no more. Splitlog and his braves say so."

"Agreed," answered Funk. "I accept your mercy. I go, never to return. Soldiers who voted for my life, I thank you; and, Colonel O'Neill, my fervent prayer is that we may meet again."

"Amen!" grated the Briton. "I echo your prayer from the bottom of my heart!"

"Come, boys," said the outlaw, descending from his perch, and addressing his band in a low tone, "we'll leave this accursed place at once, or so soon as we can get off. We'll go down the river in barges, and after a while strike over land toward Detroit. There's no use in talking. Our days are up in the 'fire-lands,' though I'd like to linger here to settle scores with Wolf-Cap."

The Night-Hawks expressed their willingness to follow their leader, but they abominated the thought of a forced exile.

"Well, Miss Huldah, we are going to leave the old fire-lands, and we're never coming back any more. What do you think about that?"

For a moment the settler's child said nothing. She stood before the outlaw in the little tent which Colonel O'Neill had given him, when they were on better terms than now, and looked up into his darkly handsome face.

"Of course, sir, I do not wish to go," were the words that fell from her lips, at last. "But I know 'tis useless for me to appeal to you."

"Utterly useless, Huldah," he answered, calmly. "I will offer you no violence, and none shall come to you from any one. But let me tell you now that I am very passionate, and that no hand shall snatch you from me. I will make no avowal of love; this is not the place for such; but if I did not love you I would return you to the old man, who, in *your* presence calls you child. Huldah, tell me how many lovers you possess?"

"None, unless I must regard you as such," she answered, with a faint smile.

"You should have thought a moment before you spoke. There's Wolf-Cap—"

"His hair is gray in many places," said Huldah, interrupting him. "He is not my lover."

"Granted; but hasn't some young hunter in Fort Strong looked softly into your eyes? Speak truly, Huldah Armstrong—I want to know."

For a moment the settler's daughter recalled the daring young men who had bravely defended their loved ones in the besieged fort, and a flush of crimson mantled her fair cheeks.

"I think I have no lover," she said, looking up again.

"But you blushed while you thought," said the outlaw quickly; "and blushes, like figures, Huldah, do not lie. Some young buckskin-clad fellow has made your heart beat fast behind the walls of the doomed fort. Tell me his name."

"Why would you know?"

"I would kill him, if he escaped the massacre. Huldah, I will endure no rivals for your hand. Remember this. But you have skipped a lover."

The fair girl, whose cheeks had grown pale beneath the vengeful words, looked surprised.

"Yes, you possess a third lover, Huldah. Can you not name him?"

"I can not. Your words are fraught with mystery," she replied.

"Colonel O'Neill is your lover. He tried to have me shot, that he might possess you. What do you think of your red-coated Adonis? He's the handsomest of all your lovers—isn't he, Huldah?"

The outlaw laughed at his sarcastic question, and turned to talk to one of his men, whose face appeared at the opening.

A short conversation in a low whisper passed between the Night-Hawks, when the face disappeared, and Funk turned to his captive again.

"We won't get off till near sundown," he said. "That liveried dog has refused to loan us his boats, and Splitlog has been compelled to send to the mouth of the Catauga for several of his own. By heavens! Huldah, I want to meet that man away from his men. I'd promote Major Gosnoke to the colonelcy with a bullet. There's something devilish afoot. I feel it. This night will witness treacherous deeds. O'Neill will not give you up tamely—neither will I!"

A moment later the outlaw walked from the tent, and Huldah Armstrong heard him say a few words to the Night-Hawks, who guarded her, before he walked away.

The long hours of that summer day waned, and not a shot was fired at the fort. It was a painful silence to the girl, and told of bloody scenes during the coming darkness. She could see the charred roof from her prison, but not a besieged form greeted her eye.

By and by the trees on the river-bank cast long shadows, and Splitlog, followed by numerous warriors and a few soldiers, were seen approaching the outlaw's tent.

Five Night-Hawks received the company with lowering gaze, and a word from the chief drew out Roy Funk and his prisoner.

"We're ready, chief," said the Night-Hawk leader.

"Then to the river," replied Splitlog, pointing to the water. "The boats wait for the Night-Hawks of the fire-lands."

The entire party marched down to the river, where an outlaw and several Indians guarded two large and strong boats.

"This is the beginning of our journey, Huldah," said Roy Funk, as he gently lifted the settler's daughter into one of the barks. "The beginning, I say: God knows what the ending will be."

His words implied grave doubts of a safe termination of the voyage; but the next moment he was talking cheerfully to his men and the chief.

"We'll see you again, Splitlog," called the outlaw, as the boats were cast from their moorings. "We'll drink fire-water some day over our doings in the fire-lands. But remember what I whispered in your ear; watch him, as you would a snake!"

Then the outlaws seized the pliant paddles, and the two big boats moved rapidly down the current.

For the dusk that stretched before the voyagers seemed to breathe of a lurking foe.

Splitlog and his companions watched the boats until a bend in the river hid them from sight.

"Now," said the chief, turning away, "the white man's fort falls. The night is coming on, and the flames of the big timbers must light the sky."

But other scenes than the taking of the block-house, were to demand the Wyandot's attention before dawn.

CHAPTER X.

BAFFLED IN AMBUSH.

AN hour after the departure of the exiles, night spread her pall over the earth, and two men scaled the stockade of Fort Strong and glided toward the hill lately tenanted by the foe.

The spies—for spies the couple undoubtedly were—boasted of white skins, and the moon, just rising and showering her light through the trees beside the river, proclaimed them Wolf-Cap and Mark Harmon.

"I can't understand this silence," remarked the old trapper to his companion. "Surely the demons hev'n't given over the attack."

"Perhaps they have quarreled among themselves," said young Harmon.

"It may be. O'Neill is a fidgety fellow, they say, and if he gets spiteful at Splitlog, why he'll withdraw his support. Why they didn't attack us last night when they could have won, may ever remain a mystery. But silence now—we've reached the hill."

For some minutes the twain crouched at the foot of the acclivity and listened, but heard nothing. Where was the foe? Wolf-Cap was puzzled, and threw one of his queer enigmatical looks into Harmon's face.

"Bless me! if I don't believe they've vamoosed," he whispered, and then, bidding his comrade retain his position, he proceeded to extend the reconnoissance to the top of the hill.

Ten minutes later he returned.

"Good news for the fort, boy!" he said, in tones of undisguised joy. "The varmints hev vamoosed the diggin's."

"What! they haven't retreated with victory in their grasp?" exclaimed the youth.

"They're gone, anyhow. The red dogs marched around the hills to the river, and the Indians took a southeasterly trail. This tells the story of a family quarrel. O'Neill has got his back up about su'thin, and so he cut loose from Splitlog."

"Then let's go back and tell the good news," said Mark Harmon, eagerly. "Then we hunt for Huldah."

"Yes; we'll follow Splitlog until we find Funk, for the outlaw will, of course, stick with the chief; they've been old cronies for years, and Funk isn't the man to trust himself among a British regiment with a pretty woman. O'Neill might want Huldah, you see, and, backed by his men, Funk wouldn't hev the ghost of a show as his rival."

The spies now set out on their return to the fort, and Wolf-Cap rapped heavily on the gate with the butt of his gun.

"Don't be afraid to fling 'er wide, boys," he cried, in a loud tone. "The devils hev got

scared at their own shadow, and the old fort is saved!"

"Saved! saved! the foe has fled!" shouted the guard, as he opened the gate, and then cheer on cheer shook the old structure to its stanch foundation logs.

Fathers dropped their weapons and embraced wives in the transport of joy, and mothers kissed their children a hundred times, and thanked God for deliverance with tearful eyes.

"We're going now, Mark, and I," said Wolf-Cap to Levi Armstrong, in the midst of the rejoicings, "and we're going to fetch your girl back, too."

"You shall not go alone, Belt. I will—"

"You will stay right where you are!" interrupted the hunter, imperatively. "You are needed here. Some band of dusky fellows may attack the fort during my absence, and these helpless women and children can not spare you. Did I say that Mark and I war going alone? Yes. But we are not. Silver Hand and Golden Cheek will join us somewhar in the woods, and these two fellows kin outwit a thousand Night-Hawks."

Armstrong reluctantly consented to remain in command of the fort.

"When will you return, Belt?" he asked.

"Within five days, or more."

"Shall we keep Strong untried for five days?"

"No; put him on trial to-morrow. If he is proven a traitor, deal with him accordingly. You can testify for me, for I have told you all that I know bearing on the case. But we must be off, Armstrong."

The trapper put forth his hand, and with many good wishes for the journey, Armstrong pressed it and saw the twain pass out the gate.

"I may never see him again," said the old settler, pausing suddenly as the ponderous gate swung back. "He ought to know all now. I will tell him; it will make him more cautious, and he will hate me, I know. Yes, I will disclose the secret."

Quickly then, he turned to the gate again, and bade the sentry open.

"I want to see Wolf-Cap again," said Levi, and then he stepped without.

The dusky forms of the two men were still visible toward the river.

He hurried forward; but his heart failed him, for he suddenly returned to the fort without hailing the trapper.

"I can't break the spell," he said, slowly and in an undertone, shaking his head. "I still hold the blessed belief into which I have schooled my heart for many years. When Wolf-Cap brings her back, I'll tell him all. God give her back to me, for I love her. Though he kill me, I will tell him all."

It was the earnest prayer of a brave man, and he soon rejoined the settlers, still happy over the unexpected deliverance.

But we must return to the British colonel.

At a certain point two miles below the bend in the river, mentioned at the conclusion of the preceding chapter, several large trees lay on the ground, hurled down by the fury of some storm-demon. These trees furnished a natural ambush, almost entirely impenetrable by the human eye, and from their leafy coverts a com-

pany of soldiers could sweep the stream either way, for a great distance.

The ambush was not untenanted when Roy Funk and his companions left the Indians, and turned the prows of their canoes toward Lake Erie.

The moon, as she scaled the horizon, looked down upon scarlet uniforms beneath the leaves, and the night-winds heard low voices.

"Colonel, do you think Gosnoke equal to the emergency?" asked a soldier, looking at the British colonel peeping through the boughs.

"I do. Ere this, he has obeyed orders, and peacefully too, for we have heard no noise. Splitlog knows now, that I am not to be trampled, and spit on with impunity. I played the red-skin devil a British trick to-night, and he will never forget it. But I'm tired of waiting here. It is almost time for Gosnoke's appearance, and here Funk and his accursed hounds have not hove in sight."

The officer never took his eyes from the shining surface of the water, while he answered the private, and his nervous actions proclaimed his impatience.

The reader can guess the motive that led the Briton to the ambush. He intended to intercept the exiles, and finish the rivalry that existed between himself and the Night-Hawk for the face of Huldah Armstrong. He selected a dozen soldiers whom he could trust, and while the outlaws were preparing to depart, he led his men to the ambush.

Major Gosnoke was left at the hill to withdraw the British forces from co-operation with Splitlog's warriors. He—the colonel—dared not carry out his treachery in person, for the Wyandot sachem was an impulsive savage, and he might pay the penalty of his desertion with his life.

For many minutes after the brief conversation between the colonel and his privates, a dead silence reigned over forest and stream, but all at once this was broken by the voice of a soldier.

"The boats are coming!"

Colonel O'Neill started and looked up the river. Two black spots were visible on the shining water. Undoubtedly the canoes belonged to the Night-Hawk's party.

"Ready, men?" whispered O'Neill, turning to his troops. "The devils are sailing right into our clutches. We want no noise now. Murphy, you are to do the hailing—recollect."

The soldier nodded, and all eyes were fastened on the approaching boats.

The muskets were at full-cock, ready, if needed, to pour a deadly fire into the barges.

Colonel O'Neill held his breath and glanced anxiously from the boats to Murphy, who, with the hailing words on his lips, awaited his commands.

"They're in the shadow now," said O'Neill, in reply to a look from his soldier. "When they emerge and execute four more strokes, you may speak."

A group of trees threw a belt of shadow across the stream a short distance above the ambush, and into this darkness the two boats had glided.

All at once they drifted into the moonlight again, and the studied words were on Murphy's

tongue, when he suddenly started back, and threw a look of amazement into the colonel's face.

The boats were empty!

The men in the ambush exchanged looks of surprise, mingled with superstition.

Colonel O'Neill was so chagrined that he could not speak for several moments.

He riveted his eyes upon the boats, reluctantly believing the evidence of his senses.

"Tom Murphy, swim out and intercept the boats!" he suddenly roared. "Hell and furies! we have been betrayed!"

Murphy obeyed, and with the aid of several comrades drew the barges ashore.

To the bottom of one canoe a piece of paper was pinned.

"Take care of my boats, colonel," it said. "I will take care of myself."

Roy Funk's name was appended to the writing!

CHAPTER XI.

TREASON IN THE CAMP.

COLONEL O'NEILL'S face grew red and white by turns with rage.

He looked at the writing until the letters swam before his eyes.

His prey had escaped, and he swore roundly for several minutes before a gentlemanly word passed his lips.

"Murphy," he said, his anger slumbering but not appeased. "Murphy, you, with two men, will await the arrival of the command at this point, and will proceed with it to the destination communicated by me to Gosnoke."

"Pray, where does our colonel go?" asked Murphy, who ventured because he was on familiar terms with O'Neill.

"I'm going after Funk. By heavens! that scoundrel shall not escape me. He's abandoned the boats somewhere up the river, and taken to the forest trails. But how did he know that we were waiting here?"

"Ah! that puzzles the b'hoys, kurnel," said an Irish soldier. "Faith an' they must hev smelt us, fur devil a noise did we make among the trees."

"Some dastardly red-skin has betrayed us, Teddy," said O'Neill, coloring again. "Now, Murphy, mind what I have told you. The trail they would take, I think, leads in a northwesterly direction to the lake shore. It can be reached by marching due west from this point; but I am not acquainted with the forest hereabout."

"Methinks, I can lead you to the trail," said a man who, though clad in English uniform, was no soldier. "I've tramped these parts several times. By good marching, we can reach the falls of Beaver River by eleven. There we will strike the Detroit trail and discover something of Roy Funk."

The Briton was pleased, and a few minutes later disappeared with his men in the funereal recesses of the wood.

"I agree with the Indian. There's no use in running our legs off after we have eluded the foe. It's a long way to Detroit, and we might

as well rest here as on the lake shore. Boys, I apprehend no pursuit. Splitlog, of course, will not follow, and O'Neill will lead his regiment to the lakes when it joins him on the river. The Indian counsels a rest till morning. He has walked us fast, and Miss Armstrong is greatly fatigued."

The words just written fell from Royal Funk's lips, several hours after O'Neill's disappointment in the ambush.

He stood on the bank of a narrow stream which, in those days, bore the rather pretentious cognomen of Beaver River. At this point a beautiful cascade added to the wild scenery, and he faced his Night-Hawks, who had just halted from a fatiguing march.

"Of course we are willin' to rest, cap'n," said one of the men. "That is, if you really think it best to do so, and of course you would not talk as you hev if you did not. A rest till daylight will do us no harm; but," and the speaker approached Funk and glanced at the half-naked Indian leaning against a tree, as he lowered his voice, "but, cap'n, do you fully trust the Wyandot?"

"Why should I call him a traitor? Because he has just saved our lives, Whalley? He's a genuine Wyandot; I've seen him a hundred times with Splitlog. But what have you against 'im?"

"Nothin', cap'n, nothin'," answered Whalley; "only I wanted to know if you thought him sound."

"Don't fear for Spagano," said Funk. "He's a faithful fellow. Remember, we would have rowed into O'Neill's muskets if it hadn't been for him."

The Indian upon hearing his name pronounced left the tree and came forward.

He was a tall, muscular fellow, naked to the waist, and wore a crest of painted dove feathers.

"What Night-Hawks want with Spagano?" he asked, in broken English.

"Nothing. But hold, chief. Where had we best camp to-night—here or across the river?"

"Here," and, with a curious smile, the Indian described a circle with his hand. "We safe this side Beaver—not so safe, p'r'aps, on other side."

Preparations for a sojourn till day on the bank of Beaver River were at once inaugurated by the party, and several of the outlaws employed themselves in catching fish below the falls.

Spagano, the Wyandot guide, lingered about the little camp.

To him the outlaws owed their lives. It was in this manner:

Immediately after rounding the bend that shut the exiles from Splitlog's sight, an Indian made his appearance on the river-bank, and Funk was induced to take him in. He proved to be the bearer of startling news, and declared that he was acting in accordance with the wishes of the Wyandot sachem—Splitlog.

Colonel O'Neill and two hundred soldiers (the Indian's exaggerated statement) were waiting for the outlaws at Dead Tree Bend. They were well armed, and the colonel was determined to rid the "fire-lands" of the Night Hawks at one blow.

Royal Funk believed the Indian, and ran his boats ashore. Then debarking, he wrote the

message that had so angered the Briton, and sent the canoes adrift.

The journey to the lake-shore had now to be performed overland, and as the Wyandot was desirous of visiting Detroit, he was made the head guide of the party. Before the brave's appearance Funk felt that his red-coated rival lay somewhere in ambush; but now he believed that he had successfully eluded him, and that they would not meet in the forest again.

Spagano was impatient and ill at ease as he helped prepare the camp.

More than once he glanced furtively at Huldah Armstrong, reclining on a robe at the foot of a sturdy oak, and often paused in his labors as if to catch certain sounds for which he seemed to be waiting. While gathering brushwood for the fire he made several lengthy journeys into the forest, and in the dim light he practiced the old savage habit of listening with the ear applied to the ground.

Once Roy Funk came suddenly upon Spagano in his attitude of detecting sounds, and inquired into his action.

"Indian listening for British footsteps; but none come to his ears."

Funk was satisfied with the reply, and commended the Wyandot's watchfulness.

It was ten, or perhaps quite eleven o'clock, before the rude camp was finished, and after midnight but three persons therein appeared awake. The trio consisted of Spagano and two Night-Hawks. The recumbent forms of the remaining outlaws, including their leader, lay in the light of the dying fire, and resembled wooden statues more than breathing clay.

The white guards sat at the foot of a large tree; Spagano stood erect and wide awake a few feet to their right.

"Whalley, I'm as sleepy as a winter-treed b'ar," said one of the men, in his uncouth tongue. "Say, haven't I nodded a little within this past hour or such matter? I don't see what's come over me to-night. I know my chin has pounded my knees while we've been sittin' here. But I can't help it, Whalley; and if I do drop asleep, you'll let me go, and keep mum to the captain, won't you?"

"Yes, but keep awake if you can, Zigler," returned Whalley, and a yawn stretched his mouth to its greatest dimensions. "Mind ye, if we go to sleep, that Indian kin do as he pleases, and we might wake up and find ourselves dead as a herrin'."

"Dead or no dead, Whalley, I've got to sleep," drawled Zigler. "Wonder where that Injun got his whisky! Never had any to affect my eyes afore."

Whalley here glanced at the Wyandot, who stood immobile against the tree, looking into the darkness of the wood.

"If I thought he had drugged the whisky, curse me if I wouldn't—"

He paused suddenly, for Zigler was asleep.

"Zig, this won't do," he said, with a smile, shaking his companion's shoulder lightly. "We're in the frying-pan yet. Wake up!"

Zigler responded with a swinish grunt.

"Well, sleep then," said Whalley, supplementing his words with an oath, "I'll watch the Indian myself!"

He fastened his eyes upon the Wyandot; but soon the Indian faded into a bluish mist, as it were, and the watcher was asleep, like his comrade!

Spagano looked at the sleepers, and glanced from them to the flask hanging at his waist. The glance was fraught with triumph, and breathed of the red-man's proverbial treachery to the white.

He watched the guards for several minutes, and then approached. The scrutiny pleased him, and he crawled from the camp and disappeared in the forest. He moved down the trail which the Night-Hawks had lately traversed, and thirty yards from the camp paused and put his ear to the ground.

All at once he started to his feet, and sprung toward the camp.

Excitement burned in his swarthy face; but he was calm withal, and when on the edge of the light of the dying fire, he dropped to the ground, and after listening a moment with head turned toward the wood, crawled forward to Huldah Armstrong's cot.

Spagano was proving himself a traitor, and his bearing told that this was not his first Judas act.

He reached the robe-couch, and bent over the sleeping girl.

She lay near Roy Funk, who tossed uneasily about, the victim of some terrible dream.

It seemed impossible for Spagano to steal the girl, if theft was his intention, without rousing her, but he proved himself equal to the emergency.

Suddenly stooping, he clapped one brawny hand over the bright-red lips, while the other snatched their owner from the ground, in the twinkling of an eye!

Then he sprung backward over the sleeping Night-Hawks; but was brought to an abrupt stand by the sound of rushing feet.

He leaned forward and looked with an expression of satisfaction, which was soon transformed into one of horror.

For Colonel O'Neill appeared, like a giant, in the flickering light, and the savage caught a glimpse of a phalanx of red-coats in the rear.

What would be done?

It was evident that Spagano was aiding parties other than O'Neill and Royal Funk, and that he had mistaken a deadly footstep for a friendly one.

He looked into the Briton's eyes a moment, and then glanced at the sleeping outlaws.

The next instant he threw Huldah before his heart, and sprung toward the forest, a wild yell pealing from his throat as he executed the latter action.

The effect of spring and yell was electrical.

Royal Funk and all his comrades, save Whalley and Zigler, leaped to their feet, to be greeted with a volley from the British muskets.

It was a telling volley. Every Night-Hawk sunk back, either killed or wounded, and Spagano, the girl-stealer, reeled like a youthful drunkard.

Huldah Armstrong fell from his grasp, and the next moment Colonel O'Neill was at her side. As he stooped to lift her up, the Wyandot darted to his feet and hurled him back with the strength of a tiger.

Soldiers sprung to their leader's aid; but ere they reached the spot Spagano and the girl were gone.

The red-coats caught a glimpse of the Indian's dusky figure as he disappeared, and started to pursue. For several minutes his footsteps guided them, and then those sounds ceased. Colonel O'Neill was resolved that Huldah Armstrong should not escape him.

He had the fire fanned into a new existence, and soon a dozen torches flashed their lurid flames throughout the forest.

The soldiers knew that it was poor policy to hunt a hidden Indian with torches, but it was evident that Spagano was desperately, ay, mortally, wounded, and had fallen somewhere in the neighborhood. This conjecture, advanced by the colonel, was soon confirmed.

The Wyandot was found dead at the bottom of a forest knoll; but Huldah Armstrong was still missing!

"Blast the Indian!" hissed O'Neill, spurning the corpse with his foot. "He's past torture, curse 'im! But the girl—we'll find her yet. We must find her! A hundred guineas to the soldier who first discovers her!"

CHAPTER XII.

ROWING AND RUNNING FOR LIFE.

SPAGANO bore Huldah Armstrong to the knoll where his strength suddenly deserted him, and he sunk to the earth.

"White girl go!" he said, looking at Huldah, who stood over him undecided how to act. "Indian got to die here. English bullet cut life-string. The red-coat soldier want girl; he come here soon. Look! there burns his soldiers' fires. Quick, girl! keep from him. Wolf-Cap in the wood; he find you soon."

"Wolf-Cap!" cried Huldah. "Was you working for him?"

The Indian nodded, unable to speak.

"Where is he?"

A feeble red hand pointed to the southeast, and the Indian fell back with a groan.

The settler's daughter bent over him, but the red-man's soul was pursuing the trail to his happy hunting-grounds, far, far away from the death-freighted wood.

"Dead—my only friend gone!" exclaimed the girl. What shall I do? Give myself to the Briton? No, no! a thousand deaths in these forests are preferable to a life with him!"

The torches of the red-coated hunters flashed in her face, and snatching up Spagano's rifle, she turned and fled in the direction lately indicated by the Indian's finger.

The moon had reached the meridian now, and the faint light which she showered through the trees, enabled the flying girl to pick her way without great difficulty. She was confident that she was hurrying toward the Huron, and she knew that by following the river-trail, she would eventually reach Fort Strong. This hope nerved her to great endurance, and at last, as the day was breaking, she saw the murky water rushing lakeward.

A thrill of joy shot through her heart, and lifting her eyes to heaven, she thanked God for guiding her to the water, which was to her, at that hour, a synonym of safety.

She felt fatigued and threw herself upon the ground to recruit her strength. She felt herself alone by the river, and the birds performed their matutinal antics about her, perfectly happy and unconcerned.

Lighter and lighter grew the forest, but Huldah Armstrong saw it not. A desire to rest was to her but the precursor of a doze, and she reclined on the river-bank with closed eyes and half-shut hands.

Suddenly a boat rounded a bend a few yards above her place of repose, and came rapidly toward her.

It was a small boat, and contained a man, who handled the oars like one accustomed to their use. He was a white, and wore the oft-described garb of the settler; but a sword lay at his side, and rifles and pistols. He glanced uneasily at the banks, as he kept his canoe in the middle of the stream, and seemed eager to reach a certain objective point still far away.

But all at once his gaze fell upon Huldah Armstrong, plainly seen from the river, and a moment after the discovery, he ran his canoe cautiously to the bank.

At first, after striking the shore, he was inclined to believe the maiden a decoy; but after a close scrutiny of the vicinity, he became bolder and crept up the bank.

His large black eyes burned with a hateful triumph, not unmingled with the baser passions, and his first care was to remove the rifle from Huldah's feeble grasp.

Then, precisely as Spagano had done a few hours before, he lifted her from the ground; but held her at arm's-length, that he might enjoy her horror and surprise at finding herself captive again.

Huldah opened her eyes with a spasmodic start, and the bright color of life deserted her cheeks.

"Captain Strong, what does this mean? and how came you here?" she cried, staring into his face, covered with a fiendish smile.

"I boated it, girl!" he answered; "but I can't tell all now. We'll continue my voyage, and when I get the craft under way again, I'll tell a little story."

"But whither are you going?"

"'Tis very natural that you should put that question, seeing that I'm Captain Strong, and you Huldah Armstrong," he said, with a light chuckle. "I'm going to Detroit, I guess, and you're going along."

"No, no! Is it possible, Captain Strong, that you possess the inhumanity of the savage?"

"It is, if you would think so. But we're losing time here. I want to overtake the barges; they're traveling slowly, being heavily loaded, and I guess we can come up with them at the mouth of the Huron."

With the last word he started toward the river with his prize, and presently, with her hands fastened upon her back, the settler's child faced the captain in the craft.

"Now, my girl, we're safely under way," he said, when they had proceeded some distance, and I'll tell you the promised story."

"I should like to hear it, Captain Strong. I cannot conceive how you escaped from the fort."

He smiled.

"Men relent, sometimes," he answered. "After the abandonment of the siege, they placed me on trial, and I found that a current had set in in my favor. But many cried like wolves for my death—among them, one Levi Armstrong. But a vote was taken, and a meager majority pronounced in favor of my exile. I swore never to return to the 'fire-lands,' and they marched me down to the river and shoved me off with everything I called my own. I was glad to get off, for, girl, I expected to die. If it hadn't been for you and your father, I'd have been with the king's soldiers now."

"How did I prevent you?" asked Huldah.

"You told your father that you heard me whispering to Sawyer at the gate, and the old man resolved to nab me then."

"Then Captain Strong, you really are a traitor?" said the girl, bitterly.

He bit his lip and looked daggers at her before he spoke again.

"Well—yes; but it is a hard name to bear."

"You poisoned the well?"

"Yes—but Matt Hunter stood by me on that."

"You thought the men would surrender before being burned alive?"

"They would. Oh, we had our plans perfected, Huldah Armstrong. Your father arrested me in the nick of time. Twenty minutes more of freedom and I would have flung wide the gates to the Indians!"

"And what reward was you to receive for your Arnold trick?"

"My life and yours!"

"I was to have been the price of a massacre?"

"Yes. I'm talking plainly, now," he said.

"The three pistol-shots on the hill told me that O'Neill accepted the propositions which I sent him by the deserter Sawyer; but our plans failed."

The girl did not reply; her eyes wandered from his expression of triumph, and she thought of her perilous situation.

Captain Strong hated her, and to humor his hate would make her a hopeless captive. Mercy at his hands was not to be thought of; he would shoot her down before he would surrender her into other hands, and she upbraided herself for not allowing O'Neill to capture her in the forest. The colonel, a monster though he was, possessed several good traits; Zebulon Strong, the traitor, could boast of none.

"You're tryin' to catch the British troops?" she said, after a long silence.

"Yes."

"Then what?"

"Why, we'll go to Detroit, thence east. I shall enter the army, probably; but build no hopes on my words; they're poor foundations, girl. You shall never leave me until the hand of death falls heavily on one or both of us. I swear it, by all that is good and bad! It is the oath of Zebulon Strong, and he is a desperate man. There—girl, what do you see?"

A strange light had suddenly flashed in Huldah's eyes, and quickly the traitor turned his head and looked up the river.

A boat containing three men was bearing down upon him!

An oath shot from his throat as he turned again.

"By the eternal world! I've seen them in time!" he said, "and they might as well turn back, for they can't catch Zeb Strong."

Relinquishing the oars for a moment, he doffed his coat and the next minute the canoe was flying down the stream like an arrow.

The figures in the pursuing boat were seen to spring to the oars with new life, and the race soon became one of the most exciting character. Captain Strong possessed the strength of a giant in his iron frame, and his oars lashed the waves into foam, as he drove the boat toward his goal, Lake Erie, distant many miles.

"You needn't pray for their success," he cried, looking up into Huldah's wistful, hopeful face, "for they can't catch us! It's impossible! Your father gave me a splendid boat with oars that cannot break. By Heavens! with this canoe I could shoot the fury rapids of perdition. With these sticks—"

Snap went an oar!

A cry of horror rung from the captain's throat and he tried to use the broken paddle, but without effect.

The boat began to become unmanageable, and he tried to guide it ashore with the sound oar, swearing like a trooper all the time.

The canoe struck the bank at last, and the captain looked at his followers, now within rifle-shot. He saw three weapons leveled at his breast; but he was shielding it with the girl and they dared not shoot.

"Drop the girl!" came a voice from the boat.

Strong greeted it with a laugh.

"I'm no fool!" he cried. "I'm Zebulon Strong I am. So good-by, boys! we'll meet again, mebbe," and he waved his hat at the occupants of the boat, then sprung into the forest.

A minute after his disappearance, the trio reached the spot and sprung upon his trail. They were Wolf-Cap, Mark Harmon and an Indian well known to the reader, as Silver Hand. Already the traitor and his prize had vanished among the trees, and his trail led toward the spot where Colonel O'Neill had lately surprised the Night-Hawks' camp.

Undoubtedly the captain knew but little of the intricacies of the wood he was treading; perhaps he was bewildered, for he was running from Detroit, having turned his back upon the walls surmounted by the British flag.

The trio were confident of catching him, for the trail was plain, and certain signs told them that he was giving out.

"He'll never turn traitor again if we catch 'im," said Wolf-Cap, with determination.

"Never, Wolf-Cap," echoed young Harmon.

Three seconds later the crack of a rifle fell upon the pursuers' ears.

They did not pause; but exchanged meaning looks, and quickened their gait.

The drama that followed the surprise of the Night-Hawks' camp was enacted over again.

Wolf-Cap and his followers at last came up with Zebulon Strong.

But the captain lay full length on the ground, with a bullet in his brain!

Sooner than he had expected, death had separated him and his captive.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST NIGHT-HAWK.

Tired and disheartened in his search for our heroine, Colonel Argent O'Neill rejoined his soldiers in the Night-Hawks' camp an hour or so before day.

He found Royal Funk but slightly wounded, and, with Whalley and Zigler, the two guards drugged by Spagano, closely watched by the troops. Funk looked daggers at the officer as he approached, and a smile of satisfaction stole over his bronzed face when he noted that Huldah had escaped.

"So you spoke truly when you prophesied that we would meet again," exclaimed the colonel, halting before the outlaw with drawn sword. "Fire and furies! I'm rejoiced that we have met, and fortune has given me the best hand, as you see. It's a hand of trumps, too."

"But, colonel, where's the girl?"

The words were quietly but tauntingly spoken. O'Neill did not reply, but allowed his face to become livid with smothered anger.

"Yes, colonel, where is the girl?" he asked, again. "If you hold such a superb hand, why didn't you capture my queen with one of your trumps?"

"Because your knave—that infernal Indian—baffled me," said O'Neill, apparently a little calmer.

"Ah, then, he'll keep the prize."

"No, we found him dead in the woods; but the girl was gone!"

A flash of hope lighted up the renegade's eyes.

"You should find her, then."

"Alas! I have no good trailer with me."

"I could track her."

"But you won't!" retorted the colonel. "Roy Funk, I'm not going to set you free and trust to your guidance. Colonel Argent O'Neill is not a condemned fool! But you'll be free directly—free forever," and the old malignant look came back to the red-coat's eyes. "We're going to leave this place. Curse the winding paths of this American wood! No such forests in England; that is God's land; this the devil's. Our guide got bewildered, else we would have been here long ago, and we would have had the girl, too."

"She will never be yours now, sir."

"Never! how do you know that?"

"I need not explain. Suffice it to say, Colonel O'Neill, that she will never in this world become your property."

"Will she ever become yours?" asked the soidier, with a devilish leer, as he leaned forward.

"That remains to be seen," was the reply.

"What! do you plot in the very jaws of death?" cried O'Neill, springing back. "Fire and furies! I'll settle *that* question before the break of day. Boys, are your muskets loaded?"

A tall sergeant answered in the affirmative.

"I'm going to exterminate the Night-Hawks of the firelands," continued the angry colonel, turning to Funk again. "As you are their leader, you should be the last survivor. Kings often witness the destruction of their kingdoms. Ready to die, I suppose, Roy Funk?"

"Ready!" was the firm response.

Then six soldiers were selected as executioners,

and Whalley and Zigler were placed side by side, fifteen paces from the muzzles of the leveled muskets. Royal Funk was taken aside and closely guarded on a spot from whence he could witness the death of the last of his band.

He spoke to the doomed men and bade them die game, which they promised to do.

Colonel O'Neill conducted the execution. He gave the command of death in a stern tone, characteristic of the disciplined soldier that he was, and the leaden volley stretched the Night-Hawks dead upon the leaves.

"Well done, was it not?" he said, turning to Funk who had witnessed the murder without an outward sign of emotion. "My men shoot well."

"Quite well," was the reply, and as the outlaw's glance fell upon the still forms on the ground, for the first time, a tear of affection stole to his eye.

"Braver men than they never lived," he murmured; and then, in a lower tone: "I am the last."

He was now led forward, and halted between the corpses of his two last followers.

"I accord you a liberty," said O'Neill admiring, despite his hate, the unflinching courage of the man with whom he was dealing. "Raynor, untie his hands."

The soldier addressed drew a knife and obeyed the command.

Funk's hands crept around to his side, and seemed to hang listlessly there.

"Royal Funk, would you see the deadly flash?" asked O'Neill.

"I am a soldier; I would die as one," was the reply.

The colonel drew a large handkerchief, and tossed it to a soldier, saying:

"Blindfold him, then. As a soldier shall the outlaw die," he said, sarcastically.

Two soldiers, one bearing a musket, now stepped forward to blindfold the Night-Hawk's black eyes. One stepped behind him, and was in the act of drawing the kerchief into position, when Funk's hands left his side. They shot upward like rockets, and the soldier who stood before him with bayoneted gun was hurled backward like the covering of an exploding rocket. His musket was wrenched from his hand at the same moment, and the blindfolder was brained with the stock before anybody could realize the terrible state of affairs.

Roy Funk was free, with a musket in his hand!

Like a tiger he leaped upon Colonel O'Neill, who retreated a step and threw up his sword to ward off the glistening bayonet.

But as well have tried to stop the descent of an avalanche with a straw.

The bayonet came down upon his breast with giant force, and the next instant he staggered back with the shining steel buried among his vitals!

"There, take that, colonel," cried Royal Funk, as he sent the bayonet home, and then he hurled to the earth the only soldier who had presence of mind enough to attempt to impede his further progress.

"Hurrah! Roy Funk is free again! Another band of Night-Hawks shall gather at his call,

and woe to the Briton who crosses his path then!"

He turned on his heel with the last word, and darted away.

The soldiers regained their equilibrium as he disappeared, and a volley that hurtled harmlessly among the branches was sent after him.

"Free! free to hate the English, as I hate the Americans," he murmured, as he bounded through the forest. "They have killed my Night-Hawks, and, by heaven! from this hour I never spare an English life. Now for the lake shore, where I gathered the brave fellows who sleep beneath British guns. There I'll find others as brave, perhaps, as they, and we'll hunt O'Neill's detachment down like the Indian hunts the slayers of his wigwam pets. O'Neill—I've settled him! Forever I've canceled accounts with that liveried dog. But the girl, Huldah Armstrong? Shall I give her up, now that I am free?"

He paused suddenly and seemed inclined to retrace his steps.

He was running in a northeasterly direction, his objective point the lake, and he knew—he had gleaned from O'Neill's words—that Spagano had fled with the settler's daughter in an opposite direction.

The outlaw was tempted to go back and hunt for the prize that had been his.

He had run a great distance, and daylight was chasing night from the forest of the Huron.

It was extremely hazardous for him to go back now. The British troops were between him and the missing girl, and no doubt they would trail him to the death for the murder of their colonel.

"I can return with my new men," he said, suddenly, "and then I can snatch Huldah from my enemies. It's getting too light for me to go back. I'll not risk my life for a girl, now."

He started forward again as he spoke the last word, but his rapid gait had dwindled into the well-known dog-trot of the Indian, and his whiter associate, the renegade.

His eagle eye took in everything as he pushed forward, and all at once it flashed with a new light, and he halted and sprung behind a tree.

Some dark figure was approaching in the gray dawn; it was coming directly toward him. That it was a man he at once conceived, and the swaying of the body proclaimed him a white. If Indians were pursuing the man, the outlaw was safe; he could meet them boldly; but if white was chasing white, he had best remain concealed. He kept his eye on the runner until he almost started from the tree with excitement, and an oath escaped his lips.

The fugitive was Captain Strong, and he bore Huldah Armstrong in his arms!

"In the name of heaven, how did he get the girl?—and how did he escape the vengeance of the settlers?" exclaimed the Night-Hawk, looking at the sight that greeted his eyes. "But fate is aiding me, and I'll make something of this golden opportunity."

For several moments after the discovery of his identity Zebulon Strong, flying from Wolf-Cap and his friends, as the reader already knows, continued to run directly toward Funk, but suddenly he veered toward the right.

Had he caught a glimpse of his new foe? The outlaw was inclined to believe thus, and cocked his musket with an oath.

Quickly the outlaw raised the weapon, and glanced over the glittering barrel at his rival, who ran on, unconscious of the new foe.

For a moment Funk sighted the moving figure, and then a jet of flame leaped from the bore of the gun.

Captain Strong stopped suddenly in his tracks, and, with the cry of "A dead shot!" the murderer bounded from the tree and ran toward him.

But the traitor suddenly attempted to continue his flight. He ran forward a few steps, then reeled, and fell dead!

Huldah, released, started back and gazed bewildered upon the corpse. Her unexpected delivery had stunned her senses, for she did not move nor take her eyes from the dead until a hand encircled her arm.

Then she started violently, and recognized her new captor with a shriek.

"Mine again, and forever, girl!" cried the outlaw, as he jerked her from the ground, and then he asked, quickly. "Who chased you?"

"You shall see presently," she cried, casting a quick, wishful look toward the river.

"Not Indians, as I know," said Funk, reading the language of her eyes. "Well, we'll outwit 'em, Huldah, whoever they be."

He spoke the last words while he was running, with our heroine in his arms, in a northerly direction, and at no insignificant pace.

"If I know these woods, we're not far from a place of safety. Whoever hunts you shall never take you back to the old stamping-ground. Huldah Armstrong, you will not believe me, perhaps, when I say I love you. I do, earnestly, truly, and with a pure love. You could make a man of Royal Funk, if you would. Your obstinacy, coupled with your pretty face, has caused me to act as I have. If the stars love their Creator and the dove his burnished sweetheart, I love you. Your lovers are out of the way, now—all save Royal Funk, I mean. Will you not wean him from his wild life by loving him? Will you not be the making of a man?"

He looked down into the girl's eyes, as he spoke, with genuine earnestness, and for a moment his footsteps were the only noise-makers in the great forest.

Then she answered him:

"Royal Funk, do not seek my love. It can never be yours."

He sighed:

"Then I must do that which I would not. You shall be my wife. Death alone shall separate us!"

Huldah started. Captain Strong had uttered the same words!

CHAPTER XIV.

WOLF'S DEN.

THE reader will remember that Wolf-Cap dismissed his Indian allies, Silver Hand and Golden Cheek, beneath the palisades of Fort Strong, a few moments prior to his appearance among the ranks of the besieged.

The red twain sought the camp of the foe, and in time witnessed the triumph of Royal Funk, as already related. Silver Hand, the shrewder of the two, saw that Colonel O'Neill would not relinquish the conquest for Huldah Armstrong's person without another struggle, and so he watched that red-coated worthy narrowly. He therefore sent his confederate down the river to intercept the Night-Hawk, and to warn him of the ambush.

Golden Cheek undertook the mission cheerfully, while Silver Hand hastened to secure the assistance of Wolf-Cap, in order to snatch Huldah from her outlawed lover's power, and to put an end to the marauding band.

Spagano, the Indian, who turned Roy Funk from the ambush, and afterward stole Huldah from his camp and was shot by O'Neill's men, as the reader has already seen, was none other than Golden Cheek. He had mistaken the British footsteps for those of his friends, and he had thought to steal the girl on their approach, that they might pour a destructive volley among the sleepers.

But he failed, and fell in the wood, like many of his ancestors had fallen before him.

Silver Hand was more successful. He found Wolf-Cap and Mark Harmon after trailing them some distance, and hastened down the river. They were surprised when they beheld Zebulon Strong bearing Huldah Armstrong down the self-same stream, and the pursuit which they inaugurated in bright anticipations, ended over the captain's corpse.

"This beats me," said Wolf-Cap, who dropped on his knees beside the dead frontiersman. "I can't see through it a'l. Here lies the man we've been chasing, an' thar's a British bullet in his brain. Now the question is, who shot 'im? What have you discovered, chief?"

The Indian addressed was approaching, with the glow of discovery on his face.

"White man shoot traitor and run off with girl."

Wolf-Cap rose to his feet.

"Show me the signs."

Silver Hand strode forward and pointed to a faint trail, leading in a northeasterly direction. Wolf-Cap examined the "sign" a minute, and then looked up into his companion's eyes.

"Well, he's got the girl ag'in," he said.

"He—who?" cried Harmon.

"Roy Funk."

"He would not be alone in these parts and running toward the Huron's mouth. Golden Cheek was to have guided him to Beaver River."

"Didn't I know his foot-track?" queried the trapper. "Haven't I seen it too often to be deceived? I ruther guess I have. Come, boys; while Huldah is in Roy Funk's power it is a sin to rest. I've an idea where he intends stopping a while; but I hope he will go further on—I do, indeed!"

The Night-Hawk's trail told the trio that he was hurrying through the woods at no insignificant speed, but they did not follow in a gait equal to his own.

The trio pursued the trail an hour in silence, and Mark Harmon was the first to speak.

"Wolf-Cap," he said, in a low tone, glancing

at Silver Hand, who was walking along, with his head on his breast, his dark eyes on the faint trail, "I've been thinking about some words that puzzle me, and that fell from Armstrong's lips last night, in the fort."

Card Belt slowly lifted his eyes to the youth.

"Well, what did old Levi say?"

"I was standing at the third port-hole looking toward the hill, and all at once I heard a voice at my elbow. It said: 'If she was mine I could not love her more. God pity me and let me live to make amends.' I turned quickly, for there was a depth of agony in the speaker's tone, and I beheld Levi Armstrong moving from the port-hole at my left."

Wolf-Cap's face was ghastly in its coloring, when the youth looked into it again, and a white hand gripped his arm.

"Are you sure it was old Levi?"

"I am, for I spoke to him a second later," answered the young man confidently.

Wolf-Cap suddenly stopped in his tracks, and drew the whole attention of his companions upon him.

"I begin to see light now, and I curse myself for being so blind until this moment," he said. "Let me tell you."

"Wolf-Cap speak after while," said Silver Hand. "We on trail now and this no time for long talks. Pale Night-Hawks fly to the big water with snow-bird, and he must be caught before he sees the green waves."

"Heaven is helping me," said Belt, impressively. "I feel that the end of this terrible wood drama is near at hand. I will tell my story here, and now! Silver Hand, you may lean against that tree, or trail the Night-Hawk. I care not which you do."

The impatient Indian bit his lip, and leaned against the designated tree.

"Twenty years ago," said Belt, looking at Harmon, "I lived beside the Mystic, in Connecticut. Not alone did I inhabit the little cabin, where now the stranger dwells. A wife kissed me then, and a babe was soon to cheer our childless home with its sunny smiles. How I waited for the new joy; but alas! and a cloud leaped to the trapper's brow, 'alas! the devil came to our home. One night I returned from Saybrook and found an empty cabin on the Mystic. My wife—my Bessie—was gone!'"

Belt paused, and, with face buried in his broad hands, he swayed to and fro like a storm-cursed tree.

"Mark Harmon," he cried, suddenly removing his hands, "God alone knows how I loved her. She never knew herself, for humanity could not fathom my devotion and love. I sunk to my floor on the fearful discovery, and in the morning a neighbor found me, but little less than a madman. Then my eyes were opened. I found several letters in the old house addressed to Bessie. They were signed 'Ralph' and 'Morton.' I put the two words together and had a name—'Ralph Morton.' For the owner of that name I hunted for eighteen years, almost; but I found no traces of him nor my wife. When I ceased to hunt, I had given her up for dead. I love Huldah, because she looks like Bessie did twenty years ago."

"Now I do see light. I feel that Levi Arm-

strong is Ralph Morton. God keep me alive till I can tell him so."

"What would you do with him?" ventured the young borderman.

"What would you do, young man, with the devil who should snatch heavenly happiness from your heart?" said the trapper slowly.

"I would hunt him down and kill him."

"That's just what I am going to do," returned Wolf-Cap through closed lips.

The Wyandot was eager to resume the trail, and led the van with a quick step. For several miles it remained plain, and then it was lost in the waters of a narrow creek.

"I am not surprised," said Wolf-Cap. "He is breaking for the very place where I don't want to find 'im."

"Why does he not continue his flight?"

"Because his captive is tired. In Wolf's Den he will rest until she recruits her strength."

"In Wolf's Den?" echoed Harmon. "I have heard of the place."

"I should reckon you had, boy. Everybody in these parts has heard of it, and I've been thar. Why, thar are a thousand caves in one, and dark halls lead—perhaps to the iron gates of hell. Men have entered the 'den' never to return. Strange winds blow torches out, and there are bats in the darkness as big as a coon. I have believed the Night-Hawks used it for their headquarters, before they descended upon the 'fire-lands.'"

"Then he is acquainted with its terrors."

"Probably. But we'll follow him to the greatest of them all—death."

The trio waded down the creek whose banks were masses of solid rock, which oftentimes towered to a height of a hundred feet above the water.

A few steps brought them to a great fissure, that extended from the top of the cliff to the water's edge, and into which a man could edge his way.

"Well, here we are," remarked the trapper, stooping to examine the foot of the crack. "It looks like the cave of death, but," looking up suddenly, "it is inhabited."

"What!" cried Harmon, springing to his side, "has he entered here?"

"Yes, the ground tells me so!"

At last the end of the Night-Hawk's trail had been reached; but the final scene was wrapped in fearful obscurity.

"I've been here afore, and I'll lead the way," continued Wolf-Cap, stepping forward.

"No, Silver-Hand go 'head," cried the Wyandot suddenly, and his right hand pushed the trapper aside. "Wyandot know more 'bout cave than pale-faces think."

The next instant the Indian sprang into the fissure, and darkness, damp and impenetrable, swooped down upon the adventurers.

It at once became evident to the whites that their guide knew much about the interior structure of the cave, for he pushed forward in the darkness, seemingly with a well-known destination in view.

But suddenly something struck the wall above the trio's heads, and then fell heavily to the ground.

Silver Hand stooped and ran his hand over

the stony floor until it grasped a warm object, with gigantic wings unspread.

"A winged rat," he said in a low voice, touching his companions' hands with his prize. "It fell from—"

He paused suddenly, for other huge bats were striking the walls and falling at their feet.

"By heavens! does it rain bats here?" exclaimed Wolf-Cap, as Silver Hand gripped his arm.

"Somebody in the lodges of the winged rats," he said. "He knock 'em down here."

"They must come from the bat-chamber. I've heard of it," said the trapper, quickly. "He is fighting 'em there; but how can we reach it?"

"Come," said the Wyandot, with eagerness. "Silver Hand, fight the flying rats there once himself. He find the place soon."

Then they started forward, just as another quartette of dead bats fell from the mysterious gloom above.

Somebody was fighting the winged mammals above the three, for, as they advanced, they could hear his sturdy blows.

CHAPTER XV.

RETRIBUTION.

LET us return to the Night-Hawk and his prisoner.

To the former some of the events of Wolf Den were not unknown. Wolf-Cap had spoken truly when he told his companions that the cave had once served as the rendezvous of the outlaws, and as such a place, their leader should be acquainted with its intricacies.

He saw that his captive needed rest, and Wolf Den naturally suggested itself. Therefore, he made it his objective point after shooting Captain Strong.

"We'll go up to the bat-chamber, girl," he said, after entering the mouth of the den. "It's rather a gloomy place; but the only one where we can catch a breath of fresh air."

So he lifted her from the ground and clambered up the great broken rocks that obstructed the natural stairway.

Up, up, still up he bore the girl, and at last paused with a long-fetched sigh of relief and satisfaction. He had reached the top of the stair.

Funk here lowered the girl, and constructed a torch from a sleeve of his hunting-frock.

"This cave used to swarm with bats," he said, leading Huldah toward a dark portal of elephantine proportions. "But we drove them out and used it for head-quarters. Yes, this is the place, here are the stones on which we sat, and the giant night-hawk, which Sam Cole drew on the wall, still remains. Now, girl— What! a bat?"

His exclamation was caused by the flapping of unseen wings, and then a black object shot through the torchlight, accompanied by a demoniacal chattering.

It was a bat, and a great one, too.

"I thought they would never return after the smoking we gave them," he continued, as a dozen of the hideous beings darted from the wall to which they had been clinging. "But I'll fight

and drive them out now, for we must take this chamber. Here, and here only, do we breathe fresh air. It comes from the forest above us; the atmosphere in the other chambers is noxious."

He thrust the torch into Huldah's hands, and doffed his coat. Then, catching it at the neck, he braced himself, and struck boldly at the hideous, chattering, screeching bats.

The walls of the chamber, which were black upon the couple's entrance, were now gray, for they had been literally covered with the somber animals, which now flew about in every direction.

The heavy coat did good service. It knocked the bats to the right and left, and dashed many to the feet of other characters of our story, as the reader has seen.

"We're whipping the demons, Huldah!" exclaimed Roy Funk, triumphantly, glancing at the girl. "Already they are retreating."

He stood like a giant in the center of the cave, whirling the curious weapon about his head, and dashing his enemies to the stones. His arm never grew weary, nor did his blows weaken. But all at once he started back, and, dropping the coat, picked up the musket, that lay at his feet.

His face was turned toward the entrance to the cave upon which the firelight fell, and his eyes were riveted upon three figures standing there.

They were Wolf-Cap, Mark Harmon, and Silver Hand. The outlaw saw this in an instant.

To recover the musket was the work of a second, and quickly whirling upon Huldah, he snatched the torch from her hand, and threw it above his head for the purpose of sending it after the bats he had hurled to the dark corridors below. In darkness he might hope to escape his new enemies, who, alas for his plans, had been, for once, too quick for him.

The Indian darted forward like a rocket as the flaring stick shot aloft, and his hand closed on the outlaw's arm. With the desperation befitting his situation, Roy Funk struggled manfully, but Silver Hand held him down, while Wolf-Cap secured his limbs with ropes or cords.

"Well, boys, you've caught me at last," he said, looking up into the faces of his white hunters. "But if it hadn't been for these infernal bats, Roy Funk would have triumphed at last. Now, what are you going to do with the outlaw?"

Wolf-Cap and the young borderman held a conversation in low tones.

"We are going to take you back to Fort Strong," said Belt, at length, looking at the outlaw. "The settlers shall judge you according to your deeds. I had intended killing you with my own hands, Roy Funk, but you have wronged others more than you have wronged me. Where are your men?"

In a few words the outlaw narrated the attack on his camp by Colonei O'Neill, and the destruction of the Night-Hawks.

"So you're the last of 'em?" said Wolf-Cap.

"I am the last."

"Do you want to go to Fort Strong?"

"I care not to whither you take me. But if I have to depart, Card Belt, I would reveal a secret before we quit this place."

"Waal, drive ahead then, for we must get out o' this hole in a few minutes."

"There was a time when the great pursuit of my life was the getting of gold," said the outlaw. "I was successful, and my eagerness became catching, for my men contracted it. We amassed wealth in Canada and stored it in this cave. It is nothing to me now. I will lead you to the spot, and show you what now is yours."

"Wolf-Cap and Harmon exchanged glances, while Silver Hand looked on in stern silence."

"Well, show us your gold!"

"Yonder door leads to it," replied Funk, looking over his right shoulder at a hole in the wall. "Light the way, somebody."

Wolf-Cap started forward with the torch.

Silver Hand led the outlaw after the trapper, and Mark Harmon walked beside Huldah.

The dark portal led to another cave smaller than the bat-chamber, but as gloomy. A strange smile toyed with the outlaw's lips, as he walked forward, and there was a lurking triumph in his tone when he commanded the party to halt.

"Now, Roy Funk, where's your gold?"

"Beneath this boulder," answered the Night-Hawk, striking a huge rock with his foot.

"It cannot be moved," said Harmon.

Royal Funk laughed.

"Who said it must be moved?" he asked. "If you can trust me, undo my hands a moment, and I will show you the results of ten years' toiling for gold."

Wolf-Cap drew his knife, but Silver Hand shook his head.

"Outlaw lie!" he said.

"The Indian does not like me," said Funk.

"I, and I alone, can reveal the hidden gold, and when I have shown you it we may talk about a ransom if you will entertain such a subject."

"We will not; let me tell you this now. All the gold in the world could not buy your freedom," was Harmon's reply. "But we will see your riches. Now, mind you, Roy Funk, not a sign of treachery here, if life is of any value to you."

"If I betray your trust, shoot me," the Night-Hawk said.

The next moment Wolf-Cap severed his bonds, and he stooped by the stone and ran his hand beneath.

For a minute he fumbled there, glancing up at the quartette above.

"I touch the box now," he said at length, "and here it is!"

As he uttered the last word his hand shot from beneath the stone, and threw a cloud of dust in the watcher's eyes.

They started back; the outlaw sprung forward! He caught Huldah Armstrong from the ground, and darted toward a precipice, dimly revealed by the torch.

"Fiend!" rung from Mark Harmon's lips, as he leaped after the outlaw, his eyes half-blinded by the cunning trick.

He saw the Night-Hawk on the edge of the cave-cliff, and his hand shot forward to save the woman he loved.

His fingers closed on her arm, and with all his strength he jerked her toward him. Half over the precipice, the outlaw could not struggle, and

the young frontiersman tore Huldah from his grip and started back.

Then a despairing shriek welled from Roy Funk's pale lips, and clutching wildly at air he fell headlong into the darkness below!

"We'll look down on the old fort from yonder hill," said Wolf-Cap, on the evening following the scenes just related. "Then, Huldah, you'll find a father; then—" he turned suddenly from the girl, and finished the sentence under his breath—"then, I'll take vengeance for the wrongs of the past. Levi Armstrong—no, Ralph Morton rather, you shall tell me what became of Bessie."

A few steps brought them to the summit of the hill designated by the trapper: but alas! Fort Strong did not greet their vision. A confused heap of embers proclaimed where it once stood!

The spectators stared blankly into each other's faces, unable to speak.

Suddenly Wolf Cap started forward without a word, and the others followed.

Everywhere among the ruins the victims of savage atrocity, scalped and tomahawked, were to be seen.

"They're all dead!" said Harmon. "May Heaven curse the fiends—"

A groan!

Wolf-Cap started forward, and lifted a log from the chest of a man.

It was Levi Armstrong. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"Oh, father! father!" cried Huldah, throwing herself upon him. "Tell me, father, how all this happened."

"Splitlog came back and took me unawares," was the reply, in a feeble voice. "But, Huldah, I—am not your father!"

She started.

"Belt, you know me," and the glassy eyes wavered to the trapper.

"You are Ralph Morton."

"Yes," with a sigh. "My crime is too great to be forgiven. 'Twas all my fault. Your Bessie fled because I threatened. Forgive her!"

"I did, long ago," said Wolf-Cap.

"She is dead, then?"

"Yes. Huldah, this man is your father. He will tell you all. Card Belt, you can not take vengeance now, for I am dying."

But little remains to be told to complete our story now. Wolf-Cap guided Mark Harmon to a minister in the beautiful Muskingum Valley, and saw his long-lost daughter take the vows of a bride. For many years the trio dwelt in the then town of Manfield but in the city of the same name, their descendants dwell and are honored to-day.

After all, it was well that Matt Hunter stole Huldah from Fort Strong, for in the massacre that followed she would doubtless have perished. Silver Hand lived to a good old age, a true friend to the Americans, and the grasses of but four summers have waved over his grave.

As for Johnny Appleseed, who had appeared in the opening of our romance, we may say, that he, too, fell beneath death's sickle, ripe for the harvest of the simply just.

THE END.

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